The Fantastic and the First World War

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ABSTRACT
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This study argues that the First World War was a key event in the formation of the modern fantasy genre. It asserts that academic literary criticism formed around a set of assumptions that left it ill-equipped to conceptualize the fantastic as a modern mode of writing. By studying veteran English authors of World War I, including Siegfried Sassoon, David Jones, and J. R. R. Tolkien, it identifies the fantastic as an essential means of representing and responding to a set of events that were experienced as incomprehensible, even impossible. Because it offered a safe means of engaging the events of the war, the fantastic provided a means to convey the experience to a disbelieving civilian audience, to grapple with personal and cultural trauma, and to critique the positivist discourses that underwrote political justifications for war. The fantastic mode provided an alternative to rationalism, in an environment so fundamentally twisted that it seemed to escape rationality's bounds.

To Kate, for risking more than I did.

Contents

List of Figures

Introduction: The Fantastic in the Modern World

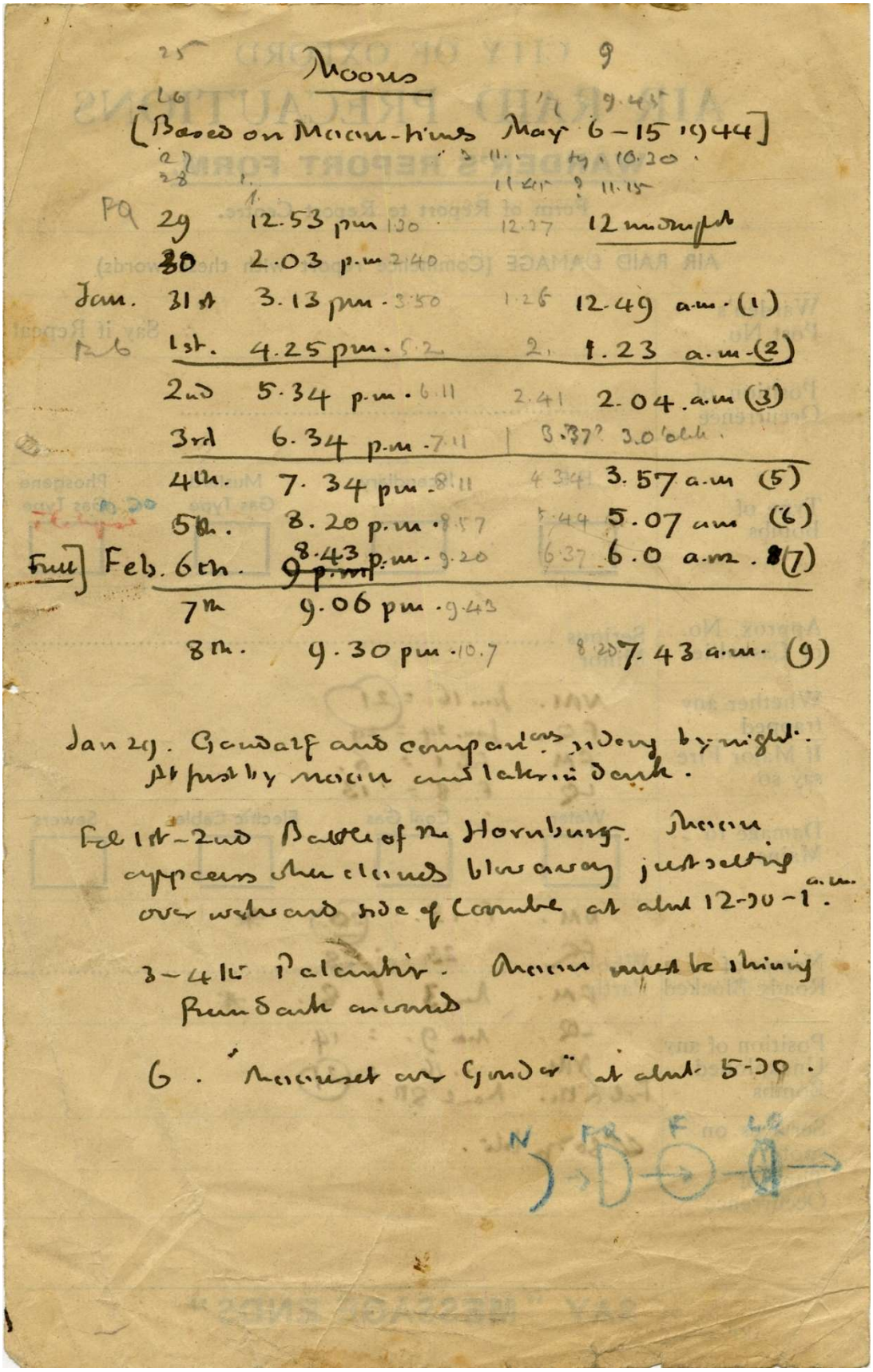
The manuscripts of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* are held in the Special Collections of Marquette University's Raynor Library Archives. On nine thousand, two-hundred and fifty pages, one finds several versions of Frodo (first Bingo) Baggins's journey out of the Shire, the fellowship's travails across Tolkien's now-famous Middle-Earth, sketches of the narrative, of dwarven doors, notes on the hobbit calendar, as well as their measuring system. One finds typeset alongside handwriting alongside hand-drawn maps of fictional spaces – everything, in short, that one would expect to find among the work of the century's archetypal fantasist. But one sheet stands out among these. On the front (as we might call it) are calculations concerning the phases of the moon – that is, the phases of Middle-Earth's moon. They indicate that on December twenty-ninth, four days after the fellowship sets out from Rivendell, the moon is in its first quarter. On February third, just after the Battle of the Hornburg, it is full. The page is dated May of 1944. On the back (or the front, if you prefer) is a printed sheet labeled "CITY OF OXFORD AIR RAID PRECAUTIONS WARDEN'S REPORT FORM." Tolkien served as a civilian air warden during the German bombing campaign, at the same time as he was drafting *The Lord of the Rings*. Due to the wartime rationing of paper, he often scavenged and repurposed whatever was available for his writing.

The form instructs its reader to "Commence report with these words: AIR RAID DAMAGE." It then outlines the information to be relayed to the receiving officer. First, the warden is instructed to declare the "Designation of the REPORTING AGENT" – that is, the sector number in which the report originates. Next, he is to name the Position of

Occurrence ("occurrence" here meaning "explosion"); Types of Bombs (selected from a list, which includes HE, Incendiary, and Mustard as well as Phosgene Gases); and Approximate No. of Casualties (distinguishing between Serious and Minor). If any individuals are trapped, the warden is instructed to "say so;" the same instruction is given in the event of a "Major Fire." Then he is to report any damage to Mains. Again, a list of possibilities is provided for clarity: water, coal gas, electric, or sewer. The form elicits the names of any roads currently blocked, as well as "Positions of Any Unexploded Bombs," presumably also to be reported by address. Finally, it asks for those public services already on location, and the time of the "occurrence." The instructions direct the warden to sign off: "SAY: MESSAGE ENDS."[1]

This Air Warden's Report is the perfect modern document. It encapsulates with appropriate absurdity the hermeneutic crises visited on the modern subject by a suddenly unrecognizable world. As Marina MacKay points out, "the history of aerial bombing overlaps almost entirely with the history of modernism itself."[2] The bombing campaign thus came to signify much of what was troubling about modern warfare: its intrusion into civilian and urban spaces, the scale and suddenness of the destruction enabled by technological advancement, and the unpredictability with which violence could be visited upon the population. In *Tense Future*, Paul Saint-Amour argues that the anticipation of violence, and bombing in particular, is a key feature distinguishing the experience of war

[1] J. R. R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* Manuscripts. Box 2, Folder 19, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Marquette University, Milwaukee WI.
[2] MacKay, Marina. *Modernism, War, and Violence*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 136.



Moons

[Based on Moon-times May 6–15 1944]

	29	12.53 pm 1.20	12.27	12 midnight
	30	2.03 p.m 2.40		
Jan.	31st	3.13 pm. 3.50	1.26	12.49 a.m. (1)
Feb	1st.	4.25 pm. 5.2	2.	1.23 a.m. (2)
	2nd	5.34 p.m. 6.11	2.41	2.04 a.m (3)
	3rd	6.34 p.m. 7.11	3.37?	3.0 o'clk.
	4th.	7.34 pm. 8.11	4.34	3.57 a.m (5)
	5th.	8.20 p.m. 8.57	5.44	5.07 am (6)
Full	Feb. 6th.	~~9 p.m~~ 8.43 p.m. 9.20	6.37	6.0 a.m. (7)
	7th	9.06 pm. 9.43		
	8th.	9.30 pm. 10.7	8.20	7.43 a.m. (9)

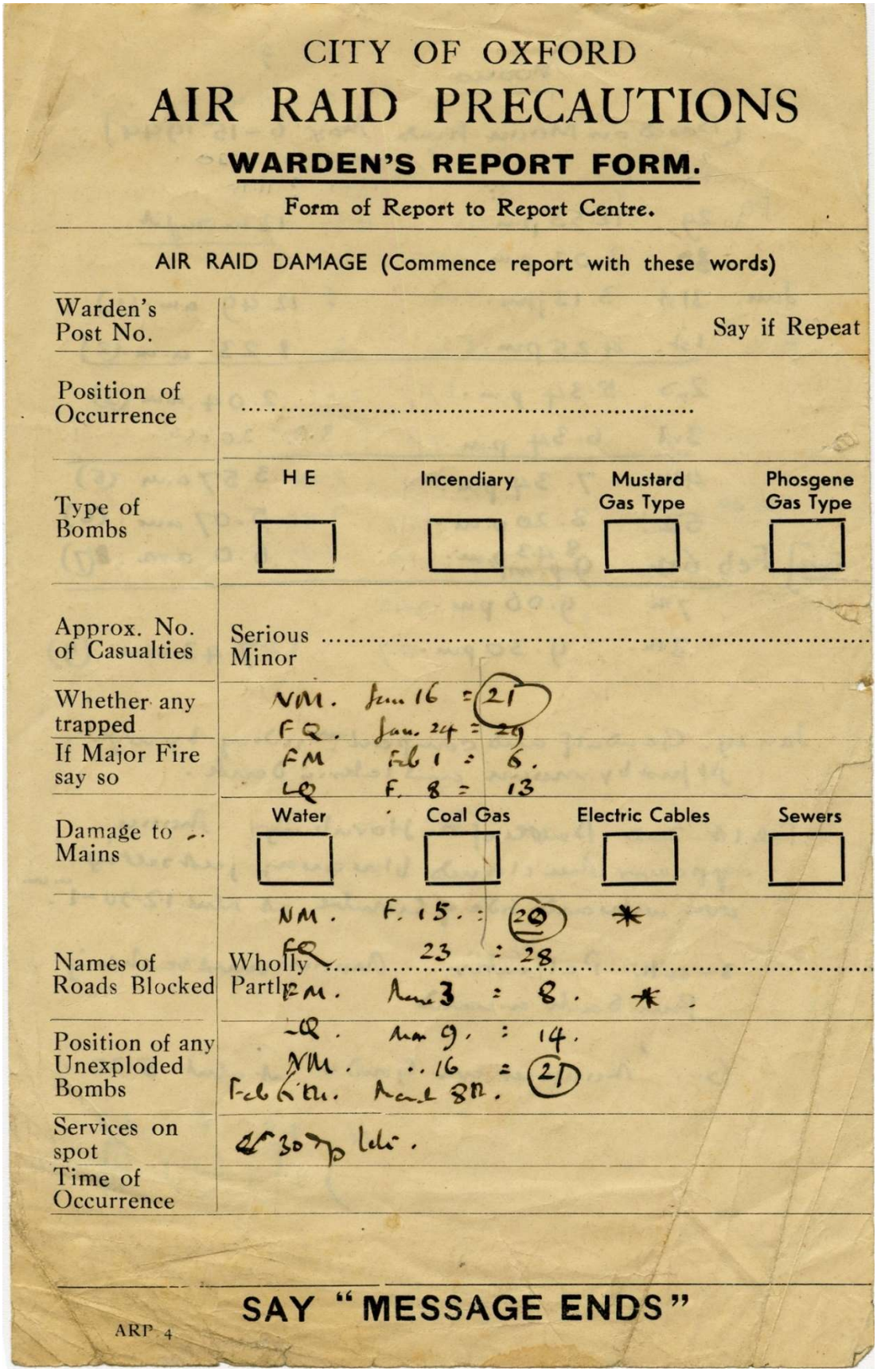
Jan 29. Gandalf and companions riding by night. At first by moon and later in dark.

Feb 1st–2nd Battle of the Hornburg. Moon appears when clouds blow away just setting over westward side of Combe at about 12-30–1 a.m.

3–4th Palantir. Moon must be shining from dark around

6. "Moonset on Cirith" at about 5-30.

J. R. R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* Manuscripts. Box 2, Folder 19, Leaf 18, Side a, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Marquette University, Milwaukee WI.



CITY OF OXFORD

AIR RAID PRECAUTIONS

WARDEN'S REPORT FORM.

Form of Report to Report Centre.

AIR RAID DAMAGE (Commence report with these words)

Warden's Post No.	Say if Repeat
Position of Occurrence	.....
Type of Bombs	H E ☐ Incendiary ☐ Mustard Gas Type ☐ Phosgene Gas Type ☐
Approx. No. of Casualties	Serious ..... Minor
Whether any trapped	NM. Jan 16 = 21
If Major Fire say so	FQ. Jan. 24 = 29 FM Feb 1 = 6. LQ F. 8 = 13
Damage to Mains	Water ☐ Coal Gas ☐ Electric Cables ☐ Sewers ☐
Names of Roads Blocked	NM. F. 15. : 20 * FQ 23 : 28 Wholly ..... Partly FM. Jan 3 : 8. * LQ. Jan 9. : 14.
Position of any Unexploded Bombs	NM. .. 16 = 21 Feb 6th. Mar 8th.
Services on spot	30 lds.
Time of Occurrence	

SAY "MESSAGE ENDS"

ARP 4

J. R. R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* Manuscripts. Box 2, Folder 19, Leaf 18, Side b, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Marquette University, Milwaukee WI.

in the twentieth century. Faced with such a novel and preposterous event as fire falling, without warning, from the sky, the warden's report responds by attempting to rationalize the unimaginable. It is designed to categorize, organize, and thus contain the bombing by systematizing it according to the same frameworks that structure modern western society. Bomb locations are rendered as street addresses; mustard gas receives the same attention as broken water mains. At the same time, the mass violence of a bombing campaign is obscured behind euphemism; the warden reports an "occurrence," rather than an explosion, suggesting the banality of the event. The disruptive effects of violence are suppressed and normalized, enabling the traditional British stiff upper lip.

Ironically, this suppression-by-bureaucratization of the effects of violence reflects the bureaucratic means by which violence was being carried out across the channel, in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. The efficiency with which the Nazis set about a task of such monstrous immensity as the extermination of the entire Jewish population was made possible in part by the systematization of modern industrial advancement, as well as technological development. This has led Zygmunt Bauman to argues that the Holocaust was "more than a deviation from an otherwise straight path of progress … not an antithesis of modern civilization and everything (or so we like to think) it stands for," but rather "another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar face we so admire."[3] Modernity, Bauman asserts, is ambivalent. The rationalizing epistemologies that structure modern life are amoral – no more or less inclined to exterminate millions than to feed them or cure their diseases. The Holocaust therefore represents not a regression to a barbarous past, but a rebuke to belief in the progressive effects of

[3] Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989), 7.

civilization. It reveals violence to be less exceptional than "a constitutive element of the very process of constructing and relating to reality under conditions of modern Western civilization."[4] Incomprehensible violence is made possible because it is rendered in such a way as to make it mundane. Modern practices cleared the way for "an event that even a post-theological age could describe only in the language of evil."[5]

Bureaucracy and rationalization provide the means for the modern subject to process extremities of violence; but what of the other side of the air warden's report? What relevance do the phases of an imaginary moon or the geography of a fantastic landscape have in a century that has seen unimaginable public violence as well as epochal shifts in cultural, economic, and social structures? Mainstream criticism has tended to answer "none," and to dismiss the fantastic as frivolous, self-indulgent, and escapist. Particularly in the context of the urgent crises of twentieth-century modernity, the fantastic seems designed to avoid confrontation with modernity – contrived almost with its own contemporary irrelevance in mind. And yet, this page from Tolkien's notes is a reminder of the close proximity the two have shared. The century that saw the global transformations we associate with modernity also produced the founding texts of what has come to be known as the fantasy genre. It is my contention that this is not coincidental. Rather, the re-emergence of the fantastic as a pre-eminent mode of writing came about as writers sought ways to respond to precisely the upheavals that are seen to have given rise to canonical literary modernism. At the core of each movement is the question of what response, if any, is appropriate to engaging the rapidly changing

[4] Hüppauf, Bernd. "Modernity and Violence: Observations Concerning a Contradictory Relationship," in *War, Violence and the Modern Condition*. Ed. Bernd Hüppauf. (New York: de Gruyter, 1997), 2.
[5] MacKay, 5.

epistemological landscape perceived by writers of the twentieth century. If the fantastic is so often dismissed as retrogressive, it is in part because we have such difficulty recognizing its origins in the crises of modernity, when the failures of progressive ideologies crystalized before millions of vulnerable witnesses.

In critical studies of fantasy, it is something of a shibboleth to begin by acknowledging the general lack of agreement among scholars on a single definition of the term. Some version of this assertion appears in nearly every major work on the fantastic of the last fifty years. Among others, this includes Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic* (1973), C. N. Manlove's *Modern Fantasy* (1975), W. R. Irwin's *The Game of the Impossible* (1976), Christine Brooke-Rose's *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1981), Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), Kathryn Hume's *Fantasy and Mimesis* (1984), Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992), and Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008). As Attebery observes, this is in part a consequence of the term's multifarious uses: "in psychiatric sessions and literary discussions … titles of erotic romps on late-night cable TV … the interchangeability of a lot of what is labeled "fantasy" on the supermarket book rack."[6] The inescapable conclusion is that, despite the long history of scholarship on the fantastic in the twentieth century, there is little consensus on what it actually is. Moreover, even if one definition could be agreed upon, popular usage of the term would likely continue to create confusion.

Critics have therefore been obliged to offer their own definitions of fantasy, expanding or restricting the boundaries to enable their explorations. As Farah Mendlesohn observes, this is often accomplished by "[picking] and [choosing] among

[6] Attebery, Brian. *Stories About Stories: Fantasy & the Remaking of Myth*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2014), 1.

these and other 'definers' of the field according to the area of fantasy fiction, or the ideological filter, in which they are interested."[7] Perhaps the only element to persist across these definitions is the principle that the fantastic in some way violates the reader's sense of reality. Charles Manlove, for example, defines the fantastic as literature which contains "a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters … of the reader" come to be on "at least partly familiar terms."[8] In *The Game of the Impossible*, W. R. Irwin argues that the fantastic is "based on … an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility … the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into 'fact' itself."[9] Kathryn Hume offers perhaps the broadest definition when she describes the fantastic as a "deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal," which she reminds us is not exceptional, but rather is "an element in nearly all kinds of literature."[10] These form the core of how I define and conceptualize the fantastic in the twentieth century; likewise, they suggest its special relevance in a time when collective understandings were being so dramatically overthrown.

This study defines the fantastic as a mode of literature which encourages in the reader a credulous performance of belief in the in the impossible precisely because it makes no overt claims on genuine reality. This roughly correlates to Irwin's transformation of conditions "contrary to fact into 'fact' itself." Tolkien himself describes

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[7] Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 1.
[8] Manlove, C. N. *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*. (New York: Cambridge UP, 1975), 1.
[9] Irwin, W. R. *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 4.
[10] Hume, Kathryn. *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*. (New York: Methuen, 1984), xii.

the phenomenon in a more limited context, dubbing it "Secondary Belief" in *On Fairy-Stories*, his seminal treatise on fantasy:

> [it] has been called 'willing suspension of disbelief.' But that does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker … makes a Secondary World in which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.[11]

I take this as a broadly accurate description of the ways that the fantastic operates on belief, and induces a reader's credulity. The seemingly isolating quality of secondary belief has at times been a target of critique; author China Mieville, for example, has lamented fantasy's "hermetic totality."[12] But I attach greater significance to the implications of the process, as well as its interactions with the epistemological frameworks that structure modern belief. It is the capacity to engender belief without subjecting that belief to rationalizing discourses that lends the fantastic its modern potency.

If, as Kathryn Hume argues, the fantastic constitutes a "departure from consensus reality," then what is included in the category shifts and changes according to consensus.[13] In the latter half of the century, postmodern theory called attention to the ways in which even seemingly solid categories which delineate reality are, in fact, determined by ideological and discursive forces: based, in other words, on consensus. Like Rosemary Jackson, I see the fantastic as "a telling index of the limits of [the dominant cultural order]. Its introduction of the 'unreal' is set against the category of the

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[11] Tolkien, J.R. R. "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Monsters and the Critics and other Essays*. ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 2006), 132.
[12] Mieville, China, interview by Random House Readers Circle, in *The City and the City*, (New York: Del Rey, 2010), 316.
[13] Hume, 8.

'real' – a category which the fantastic interrogates by its difference."[14] I argue however that the capacity of the fantastic to induce belief in the unreal not only delineates the real, but also grants it the ability to negotiate the fluid boundaries between real and unreal. Moreover, because it does not claim genuine veracity, the fantastic appears not to threaten the ideological and discursive forces which structure modern reality, even as it probes their limits. By insistently conceiving of the fantastic as what Ceri Sullivan and Barbara White call "involved in the creation and dissolution of social tensions," therefore, I aim to extract it from its hermetic totality and theorize its modern political virtues.[15] For many writers, the fantastic offered a safe, generative departure from consensus reality at a time when consensus reality radically conflicted with political and cultural exigencies.

I draw a distinction here (and throughout) between "the fantastic," which I define as a literary mode that engenders willful credulity in the unreal, and "fantasy," referring to the modern commercial genre. The distinction results first from taxonomic demands. As Brian Attebery notes, the fantastic mode is a much broader category, more concerned with functionality than which categorization; moreover, the fantastic is not distinct from mimetic literature, but is present to some degree or other in nearly every work of fiction.[16] Second, as is outlined above, "fantasy" refers in everyday speech to several distinct phenomena, all sharing some element of the fantastic in their makeup. The distinction is thus a practical response to the challenge of clarity. Finally, and most importantly, this study addresses, in part, the distillation of the commercial fantasy genre

[14] Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. (New York: Methuen, 1981), 4.
[15] Sullivan, Ceri, and Barbara White. "Introduction," in *Writing and Fantasy*, ed. Ceri Sullivan and Barbara White. (New York: Longman, 1999), 1.
[16] Attebery, Brian. *Strategies of Fantasy*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992), 3.

from the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, whose early twentieth-century work is its primary subject. The modern genre, which has staked perhaps the most tenacious public claim on the word "fantasy" since its emergence in the 1970s, was shaped largely by the awareness of and response to *The Lord of the Rings*. So profound was Tolkien's influence on the genre that earlier authors were reprinted alongside imitators, giving the appearance that even his predecessors were following in his wake.[17] This is particularly true of what is sometimes called modern high fantasy, which generally mimics Tolkien's medieval setting, heroic narratives, elves, dwarves, dragons and so forth. It is therefore anachronistic to consider Tolkien's early works in the context of what we now understand as "fantasy." It would be nearly impossible to read anything through the lens of fantasy without deriving most of our principles from the work of Tolkien himself; a tautological conclusion would be unavoidable. Moreover, through this study, I deliberately read Tolkien alongside contemporaries who would certainly not fall under the heading of fantasy. The broader lens of the fantastic thus enables us to recognize affinities between texts that would be concealed a narrower genre category. It furthermore enables us to ask why and how this broader lens was winnowed into a much more prescriptive and limiting category, according what principles it was undertaken, and what was gained or lost by doing so.[18]

The fantastic as I define it was made possible in the eighteenth century by the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment brought a political and ideological dimension to

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[17] James, Edward. "Tolkien, Lewis, and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy." in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 72-73.

[18] It is worth noting that while I draw this distinction and sustain it throughout my study, many of the authors I cite use the terminology of fantasy, either because their concern is primarily the commercial genre, or because the dissonant meanings are not a problem for their project. I endeavor at every instance to clarify my interpretation of their meanings.

empirical reality in the form of positivism. Society was now ideally structured according to empirically observable and quantifiable phenomena. As John Clute argues, the effect of this shift on English literature was an emergent need to expel the unreal into the isolated sector that he refers to as "fantastika":

> Up until about 1700 … we did not categorize works of art according to their use (or failure to use) story elements that might be deemed unreal or impossible to realize the world as normally perceived. After that point … a fault line was drawn between mimetic work, which accorded with rational Enlightenment values then beginning to dominate, and the great cauldron of irrational myth and story, which we now claimed to have outgrown, and which was now deemed primarily suitable for children.[19]

Having quarantined the real from the unreal, the associated rational/irrational binary is mapped onto temporal scales – both personal and cultural. Fantastic stories are relegated to children's literature and thus the fantastic is aligned with childishness.[20] Beliefs and practices viewed as irrational are likewise associated with primitivism, creating for rational modernity a nonmodern other against which to define itself. At the same time, the binary is mapped spatially onto the world map in order to express the modern Europeans' superiority over primitive, childish colonial peoples. The modern fantastic can thus be made coherent only by recognizing it as an implicit refutation of the deterministic delineation between real and unreal that is a precondition of Enlightenment orthodoxy.

Positivist rationalism's supremacy as the modern mode of Western thought ironically empowers the fantastic as its opposite. In, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and*

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[19] Clute, John. "Fantastika in the World Storm," in *Pardon This Intrusion: Fantastika in the World Storm*. (Chippenham: Beccon Publications, 2011), 20.

[20] Tolkien famously refutes this principle in "On Fairy-Stories," arguing that children 'neither like fairy-stories more, nor understand them better than adults do,' but rather that their association is a result of adults presenting fantastic stories as the appropriate material for children, trading on 'their credulity … which makes it less easy for children to distinguish fact from fiction in particular cases, though the distinction is fundamental to the sane human mind, and to fairy-stories.' (130-32).

Science in the Modern World, Randall Styers argues that the fantastic category of "magic" has been essential to articulate and maintain the stability of the public sense of a "world under the 'rational' control of politics, science, [and] capitalism."[21] Consequently, magic takes on subversive potential as a means to undermine "reified and idealized notions of modern identity and for interrogating the insidious binary logics and dualisms on which modernity has been founded."[22] It is therefore at the boundary of what is knowable via rationalist methodology that the fantastic becomes relevant to modernity. Colin Davis's *Haunted Subjects* describes the disruptive effect of the ghost on modern consciousness as an infringement on rational certainty. According to Davis, ghosts represent "a kind of excess or fault line within belief … revealing a gap between what we think we believe (How could there be ghosts? How ridiculous!) and what we nevertheless continue to believe (There are ghosts!)."[23] By interpreting modernity through the lens of the fantastic, Tolkien undermines the distinction between primitive and modern that undergirds progressive ideolog-ies. Moreover, because the reader's participation is voluntarily offered by what he calls "secondary belief," the reader is enlisted as an active agent in the process, and avoids the self-censors effects of rationalism.

China Mieville's discussion of science fiction in "Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory" illustrates the slipperiness of such distinctions. Science fiction, which is often conceived of as the fantasy genre's pseudo-rational counterpart, succeeds through the appearance of plausibility. This principle distinguishes plausibility from

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[21] Styers, Randall G. *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 11.
[22] Styers, 21.
[23] Davis, Colin. *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 4.

actuality. The reader understands the portrayed events to be possible in the theoretical sense, but not currently achievable. But Mieville tells us that this is a textual construct which simulates verifiability: not "reality-claims but plausibility-claims that hold purely within the text."[24] The standards by which science fiction convinces the reader of its veracity are themselves constructed and therefore mediated by social mores and ideologies:

> To the extent that SF claims to be based on 'science', and indeed on what is deemed 'rationality,' it is based on capitalist modernity's ideologically projected self-justification: not some abstract/ideal 'science', but capitalist science's bullshit about itself.[25]

In other words, the means by which the reader makes determinations about plausibility are themselves determined by positivist ideological frameworks that determine capitalist worldviews. These frameworks set the bounds of what is possible, prompting readers to respond credulously or otherwise, within the bounds of rationality. Science fiction succeeds by operating within these boundaries, or rather by seeming to. It submits itself to the standard of verifiability, in the interest of rendering the reader credulous. The text does not actually adhere to standards of veracity, scientific or otherwise. Rather, its perceived veracity depends on the success with which it rationalizes itself. The fantastic, in contrast, succeeds to the degree that it avoids the very question of rational verifiability and thus undermines rationality's authority as a method of verification.

I take J. R. R. Tolkien as my primary focus because of his formative influence on modern fantasy, but also because of his close relationship to many of the quintessential events associated with modernity and modernism. Tolkien was born in 1892; he wrote

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[24] Mieville, China. "Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory." *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*. Ed. Bould, Mark and China Mieville. (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 236.
[25] "Cognition as Ideology," 240.

and published between 1914 and his death in 1973. Much of the material examined in this study was written during the interwar period, although it was published much later. Tolkien's first published fictional work was *The Hobbit* in 1937. But during and after World War I, he wrote an extensive fictional fantastic history that has since appeared in various forms in *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, and the first five volumes of *The History of Middle-Earth*, an edited compilation of his manuscripts. These years (from 1914 to 1937) correspond roughly with the heyday of high modernism, the predominant literary and artistic movement of the early twentieth century. In fact, T. S. Eliot's description of David Jones from the introduction of *In Parenthesis* could refer to Tolkien almost as easily:

> David Jones is a representative of the same literary generation as Joyce and Pound and myself, if four men born between 1882 and 1895 can be regarded as of the same literary generation. David Jones is the youngest, and tardiest to publish. The lives of all of us were altered by the War, but David Jones is the only one to have fought in it.[26]

Tolkien obviously would not have been the youngest, having been born in 1892 to Jones's 1895, but he nonetheless falls into the same range of ages described by Eliot. (*In Parenthesis*, like *The Hobbit*, was first published in 1937). It is my contention, in part but not only because of this generational and literary simultaneity, that Tolkien participates in the modernist project, at least in the sense that his work is an attempt to interpret as well as critique the new paradigms of twentieth-century modernity.

Like Jones, Tolkien was a veteran of the First World War. After finishing his last year of college, he enlisted in July of 1915, and joined the 13th Service Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers. He notes in a 1941 letter to his son, Michael, that "[in] those days

[26] Eliot, T. S., introduction to *In Parenthesis*, by David Jones. (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), viii.

chaps joined up, or were scorned publicly."[27] He served at the Battle of the Somme in July of 1916 before contracting trench fever, a minor but persistent condition that soldiers referred to as "a cushy one," – enough to get you sent home, but not disfiguring or life-threatening.[28] In November of 1916, he returned to England, where he would spend most of the rest of the war under medical care.[29] According to most verifiable accounts, it was during this period that he first began composing the text that would become *The Book of Lost Tales*, and later *The Silmarillion*.[30] (Some, likely apocryphal, accounts suggest that the earliest pages of "The Fall of Gondolin" were actually composed in the trenches).[31] The war had a profound impact on Tolkien, who famously declares in the foreword to the second edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, that "[by] 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead."[32] This "one" was Christopher Wiseman who, along with Rob Gilson, G. B. Smith, and Tolkien himself had formed the close-knit core of the Tea Club and Barrovian Society at King Edward's School in Birmingham before enlisting.[33] Gilson was the first to die – a casualty of the first days of the Battle of the Somme.[34] The pain of loss caused Tolkien to declare, in a letter to Smith, that "something has gone crack … I don't feel a member of a little complete body now … I feel a mere individual at present – with intense feelings more than ideas but very powerless."[35] Smith himself would die five months later.

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[27] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 53.
[28] Graves, Robert. *Good-Bye to All That*. (New York: Vintage, 1998), 110-11.
[29] Garth, John. *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-Earth*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 205.
[30] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Book of Lost Tales I*. ed. Christopher Tolkien. (New York: Ballantine, 1992), 1.
[31] Garth, 186.
[32] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), xxvi.
[33] Garth, 5-7.
[34] Garth, 169.
[35] *Letters*, 10.

At various times, Tolkien identified the war as an important motivation for his literary work. Most famously, in a letter to his son Christopher, he declares that the disruption and doubt generated by the experience of war created the impetus for the shape his legendarium would ultimately take:

> I sense among all your pains … the desire to express your *feeling* about good, evil fair, foul, in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering. In my case it generated Morgoth and the History of the Gnomes … It did not make for efficiency and present mindedness, of course, and I was not a good officer.[36]

This passage amounts to an explicit acknowledgement that the trauma of the war catalyzed what would become the founding texts of the modern fantasy genre. Indeed, Rebekah Long identifies an affinity between the two in "Fantastic Medievalism and the Great War in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*." She argues that they "share a fundamental bond. In each maps are redrawn, new worlds are created, and the given is dismantled. An unlearning takes place."[37] What Long characterizes as a "fundamental bond," however, I view as an emergent affinity resulting from the changing associations of the fantastic and warfare in the modern context. In other words, their bond is a reflection of their common modern origin, or at least their common transformation during the Great War. This interpretation suggests that the history of the modern fantasy genre extends far further back than is generally acknowledged. By asserting this connection, I argue that the contemporary fantasy has an origin point in the conflict that has come to epitomize modern warfare. To mainstream twentieth-century criticism, this is a contradictory assertion; fantasy is, by definition, anti-modern is its facing. Nonetheless,

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[36] *Letters*, 78.

[37] Long, Rebekah. "Fantastic Medievalism and The Great War in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*." in *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages*. Ed. Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 124.

there is a clear connection to be made between the beginning of contemporary fantasy and the war that, for years, was interpreted as the inciting event of literary modernism. Like high modernism, therefore, it is possible to theorize the prevalence of the fantastic as a means of navigating the representational and philosophical disruptions that resulted from modernity.

By using the war to provide both the fantastic and high modernism with a common grammar of sorts, I hope to interrogate the ways that critical consensus foreclosed possible interpretations of modernity at the historical moment of its consolidation. This method is not intended to re-instate the Great War as the inciting event of modernism. The longstanding critical truism that bound the two utilized "[phrases] like 'The Lost Generation' and 'The Men of 1914'" to describe the war as "the moment in which the new sensibility of English – and international – modernism comes fully into existence."[38] The effect was to establish the war as the central motivating event which lent shape to what would ultimately be described as high modernism. This perspective was encouraged in part by modernist practitioners, such a Wyndham Lewis, who argues in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, his memoir/artistic manifesto, that the Great War demarcated an epochal shift. The war, he says, "imposes itself upon our computations of time like the birth of Christ. We say 'pre-war' and 'post-war' rather as we say B.C. or A.D."[39] Nonetheless, in the last few decades, this view has been largely replaced by the idea that the war and modernism each represents a manifestation of much more wide-reaching processes of modernization, which were nonetheless in close conversation with one another. As MacKay describes the current consensus, the

[38] Sherry, Vincent. *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 6.
[39] Lewis, Wyndham. *Blasting and Bombardiering*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 1.

"powerful impact" of the war on modernism "is virtually impossible to dispute; that the impact should be understood as directly causal, however, is a harder case to make."[40] What has changed, therefore, is the uniquely catalytic way in which the Great War is imaginatively connection to modernism. If it is discussed as an influence, the war's effect tends to be characterized as transformative rather than originary. (Wyndham in fact gestures toward this type of relationship later, when he describes "war, [modern] art, civil war, strikes, and coup d'états dovetail[ing] into each other.")[41] Thus, I do not present the war as a common locus between modernism and the fantastic in order to disregard these developments. Rather, I treat the imaginative closeness between the two as a historical artifact that has helped to shape ideas about war and modernity even as it has receded.

Implicit in this argument is the position that the First World War precipitated a collapse of faith in the doctrine of Enlightenment positivism. The promise of positivism is that history is teleological – social improvement and increased material prosperity accompany scientific and technological progress. For many, however – particularly soldiers who experienced No Man's Land – the first half of the century demonstrated that technological advancement could just as easily enable greater and more efficient acts of savagery. As Mieville puts it, the period saw

> hard' *and* social science harnessed to mass industrial slaughter – an epoch which unsurprisingly shattered the bourgeois reformist daydreams of ineluctable progress through rationality … the model of 'scientific rationality' that is 'progressive' in opposition to 'reactionary' 'irrationalism' is … a bad joke after World War I, let alone after the death camps.[42]

[40] MacKay, 7.
[41] Lewis, 4.
[42] "Cognition as Ideology," 241. Emphasis his.

The Great War created the possibility that progress and rationalism could constitute oppositional forces to civilizing ideals. Vincent Sherry's *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* argues that this effect was exacerbated by the political establishment's continued use of rationalist discourse in making the case for support of the war.[43] This shift in understanding contradicted positivist ideological frameworks that had previously rendered it unthinkable. By calling into question firm delineations of epistemology, the war effected a change in what was imaginatively held to be possible. In effect, distinctions between "real" and "fantastic" were being renegotiated during and after the war. The modern fantastic thus appears regressive primarily because of modern critical perspectives which temporally dislocate it. By resituating the fantastic into a moment that is defined by the explosive and bloody failures of positivism and rationalism, its timeliness as a means of critique can be made visible.

At the same time, this study does not attempt a broad rejection of Enlightenment empiricism or rationalism as heuristic frameworks. Rather, it contends that the fantastic provided the capacity to probe the boundaries of empirical knowability by generating a state of contingent belief. The fantastic offered what Sullivan and White describe as the opportunity "for the rehearsal of alternative scenarios from a position of relative safety."[44] Indeed, this is the significance of World War I as a historical moment. It created a demand for precisely this kind of critical reflection on the Enlightenment, thereby contextualizing the modern fantastic's apparent obsession with the past as a response to contemporary realities.

[43] Sherry, 32-47.
[44] Sullivan and White, 5.

Tvzetan Todorov argues that connection between the Enlightenment and positivist ideas of progress is actually rather tenuous. Rousseau, he says, distinguished humanity not by "its march toward progress [but] its *perfectability*, meaning its capacity to improve itself and the world – but the effects … were neither guaranteed nor irreversible."[45] The Enlightenment advocated rationalism and empiricism, yes, but the ideological apparatus of positivism was grafted on afterward. While this is true enough, it is implicit that the twin standards of rationalism and empiricism should be employed in making determinations about the correct course of action, both individually and collectively – determinations which necessarily affect future events. The Enlightenment is, in this sense, concerned with the right relationship between the present and future. This would not be a problem if rationalism or empiricism could produce genuinely objective knowledge, but as postmodernism has shown, models of empirical reality identify as objective much knowledge which does in fact contain interpretations. In the context of the Great War, for example, Evelyn Cobley argues that the documentary style for which the war memoirists are known conceals "a desire to contain a threat to Enlightenment confidence … to rationalize through … their descriptive strategies" the violent manifestations of imperialist and capitalist agenda in the war.[46] In other words, even apparently uninflected statements of reality represent interpretations. And in a conflict between interpretations, it is the powerful whose reality will be lent force to determine the future. The modern fantastic, the Enlightenment, and modernism are each

[45] Todorov, Tvzetan. *In Defence of the Enlightenment*. (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), 18-19.
[46] Cobley, Evelyn. *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 57.

fundamentally concerned with the relationship between past, present, and future, and it is along these axes that they interact with one another.

Why then has Tolkien – and the fantastic more generally – been omitted from the critical conversations surrounding English literature of the twentieth century? On the one hand, the answer appears self-evident. The content of modern high fantasy broadly contradicts the concerns of modernism and its adherents. It is difficult to see what relevance swords, castles, elves, dragons, and wizards can have to the century that brought us the Somme and the Holocaust. But this study contends that this imaginative demarcation is as much a product of the fantastic's discursive isolation as its cause. To some degree, modern fantasy's nearly exclusive use of worldbuilding as a literary technique contributes to its isolation. Tolkien himself famously declared to his publisher that *The Lord of the Rings* "is not 'about' anything but itself" in a letter to his American publisher.[47] (Although he would later acknowledge that, at least in landscape, "The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon [perhaps] owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme)."[48] Once again, however, the model of worldbuilding is itself derived from Tolkien's concept of the "Secondary World," introduced in "On Fairy-Stories." It is thus similarly inextricable from critical histories of modern fantasy that implicitly respond to principles and practices established by Tolkien. Broadly speaking, the fantastic has been excluded as a representational mode by the ways that critical discourse crystalized around a canonical set of texts and authors. Through their institutionalization, these were then used to delineate and enforce particular notions of modernity in the context of literary expression. This effect was exacerbated by

[47] *Letters*, 220.
[48] *Letters*, 303.

Tolkien's late publication. Because his work did not become publicly known until after high modernism was entrenched as the definitive literary movement of its time, it appeared an attempt to resuscitate an obsolete type of literature, when in fact it represented an undercurrent of modern literature that had persisted, unrecognized in high modernism's shadow.

The relative invisibility of the fantastic to theories and histories of modern literature persists even after the democratizing effects of recent decades have weakened traditional barriers between high and low culture. In 1986, Andres Huyssen's *After the Great Divide* fired a first shot across the bow of the institutionalized high modernist canon, declaring that it sustained its elite status primarily "by avoiding any contamination with mass culture and with the signifying systems of everyday life."[49] Since then, definitions of modernism have expanded geographically, culturally, and temporally. Nonetheless, in mainstream critical studies, authors like Tolkien are often most conspicuous in their absence. For example, in *Mourning and Mysticism in First World War Literature and Beyond*, George Johnson explains that he has selected "a range of writers [from the period] who engaged in a mystical response to mourning." These include:

> 'Frederic Myers who died well before the First World War … fathers or surrogate fathers who lost sons during the war, such as Olive Lodge, Arthur Conan Doyle, J. M. Carrie, and Rudyard Kipling … sisters and friends of soldiers killed, including Mary Sinclair and Virginia Woolf, to a front-line soldier, Wilfred Owen, and even to a writer disqualified for Military service, Aldous Huxley.[50]

[49] Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), 54.
[50] Johnson, George M. *Mourning and Mysticism in First World War Literature and Beyond: Grappling With Ghosts*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 7.

Given the range of authors and their varied relationship to war, it is striking that perhaps the most-read author of the century who declared "all but one of [his] close friends" dead in the war merits no attention, particularly when he is known for writing fantastic literature. Perhaps even more surprising, writing in 1994, Kathleen Staudt argues "modern poets have dealt with this [modern] sense of exile [from history] by describing alternate worlds ruled by the poetic imagination. The most memorable of these, perhaps, is Yeats's Byzantium."[51] Staudt is here seeking to align the work of David Jones with Yeats to establish Jones's relevance to conversations surrounding modernist scholarship. But Tolkien is arguably a larger exclusion. Staudt suggests that the imaginative world portrayed in "Sailing to Byzantium" is perhaps "the most memorable" of alternative worlds created in response to a modern sense of alienation. Coming, as it does, forty years after the initial publication of *The Lord of the Rings* introduced readers to Tolkien's Middle-Earth, this is a strange claim to make. By the time of Staudt's study, *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as its predecessor *The Hobbit*, had sold tens of millions of copies in dozens of languages. In another six years, it would be voted the best book of the twentieth century by viewers of BBC Channel 4's *Book Choice*, as well as the readership of the *Daily Telegraph*, and the membership of The Folio Society.[52] While this is neither scientific nor definitive, it does suggest that, for a sizable population of twentieth-century readers, Tolkien's alternative world occupied considerable imaginative space. The specific, unproblematized claim that Yeats's Byzantium is more memorable (as opposed to, say, technically sound, aesthetically coherent, or some other evaluative standard not

[51] Staudt, Kathleen Henderson. *At the Turn of a Civilization: David Jones and Modern Poetics*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) 16.
[52] Shippey, Tom. *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), x-xii.

reflected in breadth of cultural appeal) seems therefore to necessitate a critical framework that continues to overlook or exclude Tolkien from consideration.

This lack of a framework for the modern fantastic mode is one of the major challenges facing this study. Because it developed in obscurity, relative to modernism, no widely-accepted theory of the modern fantastic exists. More to the point, critical schools that developed alongside and in response to primarily modernist (and later postmodernist) scholarship are founded on distinct principles, derived in part from interpretations of their literary practices. These approaches are thus less prepared to account for the fantastic as a modern literary or aesthetic method. Brian Attebery argues in *Strategies of Fantasy* that even within critical discourse, the schools of thought that have achieved prominence are inclined either to find little worth analysis in Tolkien's work, or else to delegitimize him outright. As he describes it, the prominence of particular schools of theory have "forced [critics] to emphasize elements that conform to standard literary theory, even though those elements might not be characteristic of Tolkien's story as a whole."[53] The alternatives Attebery proposes include philology in place of structuralism and poststructuralism, Jungian in place of Freudian psychoanalysis, and ecological in place of economic criticism.[54] Although the alternatives Attebery provides offer to open new possibilities for reading Tolkien (along with the genre he spawned), they cannot account for the ways in which critical conversations (including the alternatives he offers) were shaped by the absence of Tolkien and authors like him. As useful as these frameworks may be, they cannot help but highlight the fact that forty years after Colin Manlove first remarked with surprise, there remains no standard critical method for understanding the

[53] *Strategies of Fantasy*, 18.
[54] *Strategies of Fantasy*, 22-34.

fantastic in the context of twentieth century. It remains modern literature's antagonistic opposite, regarded if at all as something of a tantrum against modernity, not to be indulged lest we embolden it.

The need to grapple with this problem has shaped the works of those critics who have attempted to address Tolkien's work. Most often, this means searching for productive points of comparison within existing critical frameworks – either by identifying legitimating textual corollaries or by locating a critical field prepared to concede modernity and engage with antimodern texts. Consequently, outside of fantasy genre criticism, most scholarly work on Tolkien has come from medievalists like Tom Shippey and Jane Chance. Alternatively, source criticism has identified connections among Victorian authors like Lord Dunsany and William Morris, whom Tolkien himself admired. Each reflects the need to find a system of signification prepared to accommodate Tolkien's content. But each also has the effect of temporally dislocating his work, effectively conceding the point that he cannot be read in the context of modernity.

The decision to read Tolkien as an author of the Great War is driven in part by a desire to revise this a-temporal paradigm of understanding. By using the war as a concrete point of connection I examine Tolkien's early work alongside that of his nearest contemporaries. At the same time, however, Tolkien creates some grounds for the re-evaluation of the ways we have understood writing of the Great War. The writing that emerged from the war is generally thought of in the terms set forth by Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Fussell argues that "the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War" gave rise to "one dominating form of modern

understanding … [that is] essentially ironic."[55] He finds that the war writers tended to locate a bitter brand of irony in the immense gap between the realities of war that they experienced on the front, and the romanticized version of war presented on the home front in political rhetoric. In the interest of undermining these falsities, the authors whose work Fussell regards approvingly produced fiercely realistic visions of the front, complete with the violence and stupidity that they found to be its defining features. These primarily include Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Robert Graves. Edmund Blunden and David Jones, whose more traditional modes he views as unsuited to the environment, receive somewhat more reserved praise. Even those he favors, however, Fussell concedes to be "lesser talents" in the face of the high modernists. He cites their "technical traditionalism" as evidence of a "kind of backward-looking typical of the war itself … For [the soldier], the present is too boring or exhausting … and the future too awful. He stays in the past."[56] *The Great War and Modern Memory* thus maintains the assumptions that separated high from low art. Subsequent scholars have reconceptualized the war writers, treating them instead as another branch of a broader modernism. However, although Fussell's conclusions have been disputed in the years since the text's publication, it nonetheless continues to set the terms for conversations surrounding the literature of the Great War. My study must therefore be seen to be responding in some way to his. The argument that the war encouraged recourse to the fantastic as well as to realism is presented not as an alternative, but an expansion to this understanding.

In approaching this study, I limit myself generally to primary texts produced in the years between 1914 and 1937. This period, beginning with the first shots of the Great

[55] Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 35.
[56] Fussell, 314.

War and ending with the 1937 publication of David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, is often seen as the heyday of literary production by veterans of the war about the war itself. Most notably, beginning in 1928 with the publication of Robert Graves's *Good-Bye to All That*, is the litany of memoirs that Walter Benjamin describes as "[pouring] out ten years later … [a] flood of war books."[57] This cathartic outlay of traumatic recollections by writer veterans provided much of our sense of the experience of the front. (For example, many of Fussell's findings in *The Great War and Modern Memory* emerge from his readings of these texts). These works, as well as much of England's literary production during the interwar period, were engaged in remembering the war and determining how best to live in the new present. The end of the interwar period, with the looming threat of the Second World War, saw a changing focus that is often associated with late modernism. The publication of *The Hobbit* to widespread acclaim in 1937 also represents the end of Tolkien's literary obscurity. The year thus also represents the point at which ideas of the fantastic, fairy tales, or what would become the fantasy genre, existed uninflected by Tolkien's presence. By restricting myself to this period, I hope to facilitate a reading of Tolkien's work in context of the experiences to which it was ostensibly responding, and to minimize interference from the associations it later gained with the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*.

To maintain veteran status as a consistent reading lens and a concrete point of connection, I have chosen to read Tolkien alongside texts by authors who were also veterans of the Great War. I focus primarily on prose works that directly concern the wartime experience itself (implicitly contending, I suppose, that much of Tolkien's work

[57] Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Reflections of the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 84.

can be considered war writing). The war memoirs thus comprise much of my primary material. These most prominently include Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of George Sherston* trilogy, Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War*, Robert Graves's *Good-Bye to All That*, and Max Plowman's *A Subaltern on the Somme*. *In Parenthesis* constitutes something of an exceptional case in a number of ways. It is, strictly speaking, poetry, but it contains extensive prose sections as well. It is a memoir in that it tracks Jones's wartime experience, yet it also contains Welsh and Arthurian myth, and replaces Jones with an everyman in the figure of Private Ball. Moreover, like Tolkien's early work, Jones resists classification. (Although, unlike Tolkien, Jones did not later birth an entire genre to retroactively embrace him). Combined with their similar affinities for medievalist motifs in the modern context, this makes Jones an important point of comparison for this study. Perhaps ironically, however, it is the dramatic differences contained by the memoirs that I have found the most valuable. Perhaps the most unified impression held regarding the war memoirists is their unflinching realism in portraying the front. By identifying affinities between these texts and Tolkien's early work I suggest the dramatically different ways in which modern crises can manifest literarily. At the same time, I offer potential for revising our understanding of the mimetic character of the memoirs. In fact, I find instances of fantastic motifs throughout these most realist texts. In some cases, these are figurative rather than literal, but they nonetheless highlight the degree to which writers were obliged to draw on the fantastic in order to address and represent an experience that was, in many important ways, unreal.

This study also draws frequently upon Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, approaching it as a text engaged in reflecting upon the interwar period,

and concerned with precisely the epistemological disruptions that I identify as critical to the modern functions of the fantastic. Like the Air Warden's report, I treat it in some sense as an artifact. Although many of the arguments contained within have fallen out of favor, it nonetheless offers insight as a text that gives voice to the instinct to repudiate entirely the ways of thinking that gave birth to the war and insisted on its value. I have, however, deliberately avoided reference to the works of the Oxford intellectual group, The Inklings, of which Tolkien was an active member. I do so not because I do not find them useful, but because Tolkien's work is so often read in light of his membership in this ground and their debates and artistic interactions. I endeavor in this study to dramatically refocus the ways in which his work has been read, and recontextualize the conclusions we draw from it. It is my concern that recourse to this common lens will include a return of the assumptions that tend accompany it.

Chapter One, "Modernism, History, and Fantasy," examines the ways in which the development of modernist scholarship of the early twentieth century contributed to an institutionalized ideal of modern literature that foreclosed the possibility of reading Tolkien or anyone like him as a modern author. Drawing primarily on T. S Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and *The Great Tradition* by F. R. Leavis, I highlight the ways in which "modern" came to signify a particular type of relationship to the past, which was then consolidated around an authoritative set of authors and texts whose methods and material were understood to exclusively manifest this relationship. This model crystalized and gained institutional force in the years between 1920 and 1950, dominating models and practices of critical theory to one degree or another. When *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1954 and 1955 it therefore appeared both

unprecedented and stunningly retrogressive. I argue that, even as recent decades of modernist scholarship have opened the canon, perception of Tolkien continues to be dominated by this impression. By restoring Tolkien's work to its proper origins in many of the same crises that motivated early modernism, I suggest the possibility to see him as a modern author, even as the representative of an odd and late-emerging branch of the new, more broadly-defined modernism.

Chapter Two, "The Fantastic Front," focuses on the representational crisis encountered by many veterans of the First World War who attempted to express their experiences in writing. Examining the war memoirs, most notably Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* and David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, I argue that the front constituted a fantastic space. It rendered realistic representation impossible, forcing writers to draw on the language of the fantastic to convey it in language. By considering the ways that modern military technology transformed the environment into a disturbing otherworld, I suggest that this representational challenge was a question both of scale and of ideological disruption. Many soldiers saw the front as an inversion of a moral relationship between humanity and nature. Paradoxically, this inversion was brought about by technological advancement – a measure of progress which in positivist thought was meant to accompany moral perfection. I argue that realistic language is incapable of representing of the front because according to ideological consensus, it is an impossible space. Thus, the war writers infused it with fantastic images and motifs. I suggest that Tolkien's contemporary work reverses this dynamic, infusing his fantastic myths with the demonic technological logic that he encountered on the front. *The Book of Lost Tales* reconfigures an imaginative past in order to account for the present.

Chapter Three, "War Trauma and the Fantastic," considers the ways in which the fantastic serves the opposing demands of revelation and secrecy for veteran authors suffering from wartime trauma. Drawing on *Good-Bye to All That* by Robert Graves, and *Sherston's Progress* by Siegfried Sassoon, I argue that the presence of the fantastic in the war memoirs is not merely a utilitarian demand of representation, but an authentic account of trauma, which is defined both in experience and memory by distortion. Tolkien's Middle-Earth is likewise traumatized by the persistent, continuously resurfacing effects of its own past. The haunting disturbances caused by the fantastic communicate the seeming-impossibility of the experiences they signify. In some sense, then, I argue that *The Book of Lost Tales* – as well as its later incarnation, *The Silmarillion* – represents an attempt to imagine a way of commemorating past atrocities while avoiding paralysis in the face of their horrors. At this, I return to the modernists, for whom the need to move forward while also acknowledging the loss of the war was of foremost concern.

Finally, I feel the need to emphasize that this study is meant to be neither comprehensive, nor a broad apologia for Tolkien's work, which does at times display shockingly conservative sentiments in the face of the changing twentieth century. Nor do I intend to minimize the work done by medievalist scholars such as Tom Shippey and Jane Chance, who have, for decades, found value in Tolkien's work by placing him in what was, for years, the only context by which he could be made available to serious scholarship. My aim here is merely to suggest the possibility of understanding this, very different type of response to the Great War as precisely that. I mean to open the possibility that this too can be modern writing, and that it is – as writing must after all be

– concerned with its own time. I present Tolkien as an undercurrent in modern literature, rendered invisible by circumstance and critical orthodoxy. In doing so, I suggest the utility, as well as the comfort that many veteran authors located in the fantastic, as the world exploded around them.

Chapter 1: Modernism, History, and Fantasy

The process by which twentieth-century fantasy was conceptualized as a commercial genre, and thus isolated from the literary mainstream of the twentieth century, relied on effacing its origins in the same crises that were imaginatively deployed to consolidate and valorize high modernism. Contemporary fantasy literature coalesced around the writing of J. R. R. Tolkien, which has historically been perceived as temporally dislocated: engaged primarily with medieval concerns at best, retrograde nostalgia at worst. In his review for *Time and Tide*, C. S. Lewis famously called *The Lord of the Rings* "like lightning from a clear sky… sharply different… [and] unpredictable *in our age*."[58] Though clearly meant to praise the novel's freshness, Lewis's language suggests an impression from early on that *The Lord of the Rings*, and therefore the fantasy genre for which it was the prototype, appeared essentially from nowhere. Ironically, Lewis perhaps more than anyone knew this to be untrue. As a member of the Oxford-based Inklings reading group, Lewis was aware that *The Lord of the Rings* was the most recent product of a decades-long project that originated in the First World War. Nonetheless, his language creates the impression that the text manifested spontaneously, as if it has entered (or re-entered) literary history from the outside. In contrast, the modernist movement was valorized in part by binding it tightly and definitively to its historical moment. The formal features of high modernist works were exclusively associated by critics with the social, cultural, and technological transformations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the time *The Lord of the Rings*

[58] Lewis, C. S. "The Gods Return to Earth," *Time and Tide*, August 14, 1954, 1082. Emphasis mine.

introduced Middle-Earth to the world at large, what constituted "modern" writing as such was rigidly defined in terms established by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and their coterie – hence, Lewis's contention that the trilogy was unforeseeable "in our [modern] age." Critical discourse at the time was uniquely ill-equipped to understand Tolkien as a modern author, and therefore engaged almost by default in delegitimizing him by interpreting his work as retrogressive. In the time since, these assumptions were extended to include the fantasy genre as a whole.

If there is indeed something particularly modern about modernism, it is visible in the movement's ambivalence toward the past. Being modern implies a separation from the past that is experienced as newness, as novelty. Scholarly histories of literature that center high modernism do so by asserting its status as a literary vanguard, whose practitioners and their innovations best represent the essentially transformed experiences of modernity. But as Paul de Man has argued, the act of imagining oneself as separated from the past necessarily contains a reflective act. The deliberate rejection of history is itself a type of relationship to history – one which paradoxically necessitates an engagement with the past that is at odds with the high modernist ideal of liberation from historical continuity. Modernity inevitably discovers the past to be "irrevocable and unforgettable because it is inseparable from any present or future."[59] The experience of being modern is a transitionary one, marked and troubled by an awareness of the present as a moment of change from one state to another. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the idea of being "modern" has persisted throughout history, as people often perceive themselves to be at the horizon of the future. Each era, as far back as "the late fifth

[59] de Man, Paul. "Literary History and Literary Modernity," *Daedalus* 99, no. 2 (1970): 389.

century" imagined itself a herald of the future while nonetheless living in the context of the past.[60] Modernity's newness is an elaborate self-deception, contrived to give the impression of having left the past behind. The reality of changing conditions – indeed, sometimes radically changing conditions – is mistakenly construed as a fundamental difference is nature to account for otherwise confounding incongruities. As this and other contradictions inherent in earlier conceptions of high modernism have been exposed, the model of a singular version of twentieth-century modernity has been replaced by a multiplicity of social and political experiences, as well as a variety of sometimes-unified, sometimes-antagonistic aesthetic practices. Consequently, "modernism" has lost a good deal of its descriptive potency as the core novelty of experience around which it initially constellated has expanded.

And yet, the persistent (though increasingly problematized) use of "modernism" to describe literary works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attests to the persistence and pervasiveness of the descriptor's influence. More importantly, it continues to endow legitimacy upon those texts to which it is applied. Implicit within the term is the sense that a given work contains some ill-defined critical mass of modern-ness, however slippery and ephemeral the "modern" might be. Even as definitions of modernism have expanded, therefore, the inclusion of works within its sphere nonetheless endows them with descriptive power. To describe a work as modernist is to avow it as authentically "modern," which is to say that it grapples in some meaningful way with the dilemma of historical disassociation as described by de Man. As the field of modernist studies has expanded, it nonetheless continues to confer the impression that

[60] de Man, 385.

some authentically modern quality can be identified in those works with which it concerns itself. Consequently, the exclusion of a contemporaneous work from the same classification argues that it is insufficiently modern, or perhaps insufficiently concerned with the dilemma of being modern as such. Despite the field's expansion, the term retains epistemological force. The representational authority with which the modernist classification endows a given work has the potential to replicate the deterministic character of early modernist scholarship. Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers argue that the history of modernism can be understood "as a history of exclusions… and their interactions – hidden or in plain sight – with all that they attempted to occlude."[61] By considering the case of the modern fantasy genre, with attention to its origins in the early twentieth century, I hope to highlight such an interaction, and the means by which it was occluded.

If modernism earned literary status and proliferated through its perceived relationship to modernity, fantasy's marginal status has been sustained by its imaginative disconnection from the same. Because the history of modern fantasy is understood to have begun when modernism was already established as the definitive movement of its time, it has been distinguished chiefly by its differences from modernism. Neither critical theory nor practice was equipped to perceive the ways in which modern fantasy itself developed in response to the conditions of modernity. Fantasy in the twentieth century has its own history, omitted from literary narratives that were constructed in order to quarantine modernism from low art and set firm boundaries around it as cultural bellwether. Due in part to these critical practices, and in part to an accident of

[61] Latham, Sean, and Gayle Rogers. *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 10.

publication, fantasy in the twentieth century has been perceived a-chronologically. This has occluded its imaginative roots in the same transformative period that gave rise to the modernist movement. The marginalization of the genre persists beyond the breakdown of the high/low art dichotomy because these connections remain largely unexamined. Lacking an understanding of the ways the genre developed alongside modernism as an undercurrent, it remains difficult to interpret its products, except as a regressive response against modernity. Critical norms, developed from and around high modernist theories, created the movement as the dominant and therefore determinate model of literature in the first half of the twentieth century. The centrality modernism carried as the vanguard of western culture shaped discussions and principles of literary valuation in general. Conversely, even charitably-inclined scholars tend to conceive of fantasy as a commercial genre, and as such, something of a literary cul-de-sac.

Fantasy is excluded from much of mainstream critical discourse in part by this relegation to commercial genre. Even as narratives of twentieth-century literature has expanded, fantasy has remained largely isolated from broader scholarly conversations. As recently as 2004, Jes Battis has described the state of Tolkien criticism in particular as "various interpretive realms… [which] do not maintain any sort of meaningful dialogue with each other."[62] Still less, then, do these conversations engage with literary criticism as a whole. This is in part a product and continuation of the history of modernist scholarship. The modern fantasy genre crystalized in the 1970s, largely as a result of the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*. At the time, scholars were already beginning to reconsider many of the assumptions underlying the narrative of modernism; however,

[62] Battis, Jes. "Gazing Upon Sauron: Hobbits, Elves, and the Queering of the Postcolonial Optic," *Modern Fiction Studies* 50 no. 4 (Winter 2004), 910.

Huyssen's *After the Great Divide*, which would dismantle the high/low culture dichotomy that valorized modernist literature and quarantined it from mass culture, was still years away. The relegation of fantasy to the status of a commercial category thus delegitimized it by categorizing it as low culture. In her acceptance speech for the 1989 Pilgrim Award, Ursula Le Guin identifies genre status as the mechanism by which fantasy is "excluded from serious criticism and consideration as literature… 95% of canonical authors are white men writing realism for adults."[63] (As I will discuss later, even within fantasy/sci-fi scholarship, Tolkien is often regarded with a derision that is consistent with low culture status.) The critical isolation that Battis describes mirrors and intensifies modern high fantasy's status as a parallel but subordinate current of twentieth century literature. Brian Attebery argues that "even though *genre* ought to be a neutral descriptive term… it is applied only to those genres whose primary readership is outside the power structure of the academy."[64] In other words, the genre category confers marginal status by its nature. The discursive isolation endowed by genre creates fantasy as a stagnant literary practice, in contrast to modernism's generative influence.

To the degree that our evolving understanding of modernism has shaped the larger critical conversation of the twentieth century, the justification for fantasy's exclusion from the academic mainstream is therefore interpretable in terms of its relationship to our understanding of modernity. If the institutional mechanism by which fantasy is excluded from the literary mainstream is its commercial orientation, the discursive justification for its exclusion is its lack of meaningful interaction with its time. Fantasy's marginalization is frequently justified in terms that illustrate the weight still given to particular attitudes

[63] Le Guin, Ursula. "Spike the Canon," *SFRA Newsletter* 169 (July/August 1989), 18.
[64] *Strategies of Fantasy*, x.

toward modernity. In "Radical Fantasy," for example, Frederic Jameson explores the genre's relationship to models of history and premodernity in an attempt to chart the possibility of legitimate fantasy (albeit in a strictly materialist context.) He argues that modern fantasy rarely includes the perspective of modernity; "the premodern world alone exists, and therefore it cannot be defined as premodern."[65] Modern fantasy, in other words, elides the tension between the past and present that de Man argues is essential to the modern condition, and a central feature of modernist literature. In this view, "modern fantasy" appears to be a contradiction in terms. A literature that, by its nature, declines to inhabit the present, cannot after all grapple with the dilemma of creating a modern relationship to the past. In some ways, this is simply a more elaborate rendering of the common critique that modern fantasy is fundamentally escapist and/or retrogressive. Indeed, this accusation is often leveled at Tolkien specifically, as the archetypal representative of modern fantasy. Marxist critic Rosemary Jackson, for example, condemns Tolkien's fantasy as a nostalgic longing for "a lost moral and social hierarchy."[66] In some sense, Jameson's argument simply extends this critique to the genre as a whole, though he does reserve specific critique for Tolkien whom, he says, demonstrates "reactionary nostalgia for… the medieval world," and fails to move forward "to the politics of imperialism and modernisation."[67] As we will see later, Tolkien in fact does precisely this; the Great War is something of a touchstone in his work. It provides both the origin point of his writing and the imaginative endpoint of his fiction. That this is so rarely recognized by literary critics highlights a blind spot in critical discourse as it

[65] Jameson, Frederic. "Radical Fantasy," *Historical Materialism* 10 no. 4 (2002), 274.
[66] Jackson, 2.
[67] "Radical Fantasy," 279-80.

developed over the twentieth century. For the moment, however, it is enough to point out that fantasy's delegitimization is frequently justified on the grounds that it declines to inhabit the modern moment.

Critiques such as these, leveled at Tolkien's work, have shaped our understanding of modern fantasy. *The Lord of the Rings* served as a template for much of what would later become the fantasy genre. Attebery has gone so far as to define the genre as "the set of texts that in some way or other resemble *The Lord of the Rings*," suggesting the degree to which Tolkien sets the terms of inclusion.[68] Ballantine Books was the first publisher to create an imprint devoted to the publication of modern high fantasy: Ballantine Adult Fantasy was founded in 1969, largely on the success the company enjoyed as the first American publisher of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1965. Their earliest publications included classic fantasists such as Lord Dunsany and William Morris, but later moved on to original work by contemporary authors.[69] Ballantine's chosen publications similarly give the impression of fantasy as an essentially antiquated form that suddenly re-appeared with *The Lord of the Rings*. The subsequent works which formed the bulk of the genre were largely written in imitation of or response to *The Lord of the Rings*. Authors in the genre are necessarily working in the context of Tolkien, whether imitating, critiquing, or otherwise. Tolkien's influence on the genre, however, is not limited to inspiring responses from subsequent authors. In *Stories About Stories*, Attebery points out that the practice of writing what we would now consider fantasy persisted during the interwar decades. Hope Mirrlees, a contemporary and acquaintance of Virginia Woolf, for example, published novels like *Lud-in-the-Mist* throughout the period. Nonetheless, her

[68] *Strategies of Fantasy*, 14.
[69] James, 72-73.

exclusion from literary history was sufficiently complete for Lewis's declaration in 1954. After Tolkien, *Lud-in-the-Mist* was published by Ballantine as part of the Adult Fantasy Series, retroactively giving the appearance that Mirrlees was part of the modern genre that followed in Tolkien's wake.[70] Tolkien's work has thoroughly shaped not only the genre itself, but our ability to define, describe, and discuss it. The terms with which critics initially responded to *The Lord of the Rings* therefore inform the current state of fantasy scholarship, and vice versa.

The Lord of the Rings appeared at a moment in which critical discourse was perhaps uniquely configured to reject it. Critical frameworks constructed upon established models derived from high modernism engendered a prescriptive discourse that was hostile to the idea of fantasy as a literary practice. By the time Tolkien entered the public consciousness, a narrative of modern literature had crystalized and been endowed with academic authority through the work of literary critics. This was accomplished in part by the selection and valorization of a set of canonical authors whose inclusion was upheld by the construction of a tradition that meaningfully bound them in terms of their relationship to the past. Critical discourse identified this relationship with the perceived manifestation of a set of principles established by the early practitioners of high modernism. These principles were observable in phenomena such as "formal invention, difficulty, and aesthetic autonomy," which "pervaded the assumptions of critics on both the right and the left."[71] The authority of the academy leant prescriptive power to these descriptive features, such that by the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, its style and content both appeared synonymous with the antimodern. That

[70] *Stories About Stories*, 57-59.
[71] Latham and Rogers, 18.

characterization has retained its epistemological power even as the assumptions on which it was founded have been revised by the critical community.

The critical conversation surrounding Tolkien (and consequently the genre that he spawned) therefore carried at its inception a number of assumptions that rendered it impossible to see Tolkien meaningfully as a modern author. Through the process of consolidation by which modernism was canonized, "modern" in the literary context came to possess a necessary relationship with the sorts of formal characteristics present in the writings of Eliot and Joyce, but not exhibited by Tolkien's work. As a result, critical consensus necessarily interpreted *The Lord of the Rings* to be nostalgic in nature, and therefore retrogressive with regard to modernity. The ways in which the text attempted to chart its own relationship with history were uninterpretable within a critical framework grounded in the study of high modernism. That Tolkien's work was catalyzed by modernity was not apparent at the time it became available for public consumption. It had developed in private obscurity along trajectories distinct from the high modernist texts that dictated contemporary understandings of modernity in literature. Because of the asynchonicity between the text's publication and the beginnings of the project of which it was the culmination, the ways in which it too navigated the tensions between past and present were invisible to scholars.

Revising our critical understanding of Tolkien's work, and consequently the fantasy genre, therefore requires that we reestablish its origins as a product of the First World War. Such an approach challenges the impression that his works arose spontaneously by making visible the ways in which they grew out of interpreting their own time. In doing so, we find that Tolkien's work was born in response to many of the

same conditions as high modernism. Like de Man's modern literature, Tolkien's early work strains to navigate the tension of an unsustainably ambiguous relationship to the past. It does so in a way unlike the canonical modernists whose aesthetic experimentation carried the weight of critical authority in the middle of the twentieth century. Tolkien engages with twentieth-century modernity by constructing a narrative of the past that is seeded in its own way with the crises of the modern world. Locating one origin of his project in the First World War enables us to use the war as a common point of departure. The war shaped British public consciousness for years afterward, and in the process, helped to define modernity for the twentieth-century British subject. While the idea that the war served as the origin of what we call modernism has been largely done away with, its consistent presence in the literary imagination in the years between 1914 and 1937 provides a strain that can be followed both in the works of Tolkien and canonical modernists. By doing so, we can draw conclusions about the different strategies with which they navigate the upheavals of their mutual present.

Theorizing High Modernism: "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

To understand how modernist scholarship and canonization foreclosed the possibility of a charitable modern understanding of Tolkien's work, we first must understand how modernism as such came to signify the authoritative artistic relationship to history. One of the necessary steps to the canonization of certain authors as "modern" was to locate their works within a historical context. To name a work "modern," after all, locates it at the leading edge of history. A historical context is thus a necessary

component to establishing the relevance of the modern. But the sense, expressed by many of the works under consideration, that contemporary history represented a break with the past constituted a barrier to any such attempt. Without historical context, the "modern" lacks a clear point of contrast against which to position itself. It becomes much more challenging to articulate the body of works as a coherent movement. Consequently, early modernism set about constructing a history against which to define itself. This history was often articulated and embodied in the idea of the artistic tradition. The concept provided a malleable body (or bodies) of works with and against which modernism was able to define itself. The strategies devised by artists and critics alike to overcome the challenge of defining the modern in art established the terms by which subsequent works of art and literature were evaluated. The terms in which critics were obliged to address art developed in part in response to the demands that emerged from this tension between history and modernity. The solutions arrived at by artists and scholars, and enforced by the academy, created the conditions for modern fantasy's chilly reception.

It is not sufficient to point out that early modernist scholarship prescribed particular solutions to the dilemmas of twentieth-century modernity. This alone would not be sufficient to devalue an entire mode of writing under the auspices of the genre. Rather, the question is how did the endorsement of one set of responses to the modern come to enact the exclusion of all others, and how did the process act on fantasy in general and J. R. R. Tolkien in particular? It is a consequence of the method by which modernism made itself coherent and was thereby consolidated into a defining set of features that laid the boundaries of the movement. Latham and Rogers describe the early process of consolidation as a battle for the right to define modernity:

> Figures ranging from Rimbaud to Pound were… entangled in this larger revaluation of the meaning and value of the modern; they helped fashion one of the earliest definitions of modern by proclaiming first that form was *the* defining feature of an object of text, and second, that this new formalism was supremely modern.[72]

It is the second element that primarily concerns us here. The persistent idea that formal experimentation is "supremely" (and therefore uniquely) modern creates the conditions for the exclusion of alternative artistic engagement with modernity. To articulate modernism in these terms required that it be constituted as a movement. To construe such a group as a unified whole, principles were expressed that provided a common solution to the problem of modernity as it was later described by de Man. These principles were held to be meaningfully and inherently attached to the observable traits of many of the works in question: formal experimentation in this case. At the same time, such a formulation required an outside, a counterpoint against which to define itself by exclusion. A text that failed to exhibit the characteristics expected of a modern work would be presumed to be retrogressive. It would thus be under the burden of proving its modern-ness to a hostile audience. For Tolkien, whose content was derived largely from medieval sources, this challenge was all the greater.[73]

Early modernism justified its exclusivity by theorizing itself in a relationship to the past that was capable of imaginatively overcoming the contradictions inherent in the idea of modernity. To do this, it had to imaginatively construct a version of the past that invited its response. To illustrate this process, I examine T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" – Eliot's artistic manifesto of sorts, with regards to the artist's

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[72] Latham and Rogers, 30. Emphasis in the original.

[73] James Joyce's *Ulysses* offers a visible counter-example, with its allusive and schematic use of *The Odyssey* and other classical works. But Tolkien uses these sources literally; Joyce does not. Moreover, Tolkien's work lacks the formal experimentation that came to define high modernist literature.

relationship to the past. I have not chosen this text in the belief that it definitively encompasses modernism as a whole. Such an assumption would reinforce the prescriptive discourse against which I have positioned myself. Rather, it is because the strategies Eliot employs here deeply influenced later attempts to understand, interpret, and codify modernism as a coherent, enclosed literary movement. The idea of a continuous tradition, as well as the manner in which a modern poet is expected to relate to it, persists as a major theme of modernist scholarship. It provides first, a standard of inclusion for a set of authors, and second, a concrete expression of the tension between past and present that constitutes an experience of the modern moment. Both are necessary components to defining a group of texts as identifiably "modern." Eliot deploys the idea of tradition to navigate the manifestation of the past in the present and construct a theory of modern art that would later be codified and authorized by the academy. His model of tradition is designed as a means to circumnavigate what he saw as the culturally bankrupt practices of nineteenth century poetics, and claim inheritance of a greater poetic lineage.

Eliot's use of "tradition" concretizes an ambivalence toward the past that emerges from the sense of being modern. If modernity as a quality implies unprecedented newness, then deference to an authoritative tradition arguably serves little purpose except to impede innovation. Thus, he distinguishes his model of tradition from its common usage. The word, he says, is generally only employed positively by evoking "some pleasing archaeological reconstruction."[74] This version of tradition is socially acceptable in so far as it is the object of a sufficiently rational, modern, and scientific study, which dispassionately isolates it in the past. Such an approach reassures the modern subject of

[74] Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1950), 47.

their modernity, neatly sidestepping the inescapable influence of the past. It reassures modern subjects that they are "up to date, rational, well armed, technologically savvy … [in contrast to] others who are seen as backward, savage, primitive."[75] The artistic corollary to this disapproval of tradition is that originality is valorized above all: that "the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors" is the source of greatest aesthetic satisfaction.[76] For Eliot, however, this is a mark of immaturity in the artist, and shortsightedness, or outright denial in the reader. He asserts the seemingly paradoxical formula that tradition is an inherent and indeed a necessary component of modernity:

> the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable … involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence … a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe … has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense … is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time.[77]

This preoccupation with the inescapability of the past in the present anticipates de Man's exploration of modernity's inherent contradictions. It acknowledges the falsity of pretensions toward an escape from history, while theorizing an art founded in novelty. To be a modern artist requires conscious habitation of the transitional break between past and present. Constructing a tradition makes this habitation possible by making its qualities concrete.

Eliot's ideal artist is one that most purely and dispassionately inhabits the transitionary moment – that is, most objectively acts as a conduit between the past and present. This relies on (or produces) artistic independence from the personal conditions

[75] Attebery, *Stories*, 10.
[76] Eliot, 48.
[77] Eliot, 49.

and positions of the artist. The perfect artist displays perfect separation between "the man who suffers, and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material."[78] This does not mean the material of the past comes through unchanged. Indeed, Eliot goes to pains to differentiate his method from mere imitation. "To conform," he says, would be "not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art."[79] Rather, the work derives its meaning in part from the meaning of its predecessors, and the transformative effect each has on the other. The tradition is a set of "existing monuments," which "form an ideal order among themselves." Each new ("really new") piece added to the collection alters the meaning of the whole: "the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted."[80] The meaning of a given text is therefore determined in part by its place in the tradition – a tradition that is successively and continuously altered with each addition. Eliot's model of tradition embodies the perpetual transitionary moment that de Man describes as the experience of modernity. A fluidity is therefore inherent in the ideal tradition's deterministic and descriptive power.

Eliot utilizes his traditional model to endow his understanding of the past with the appearance of objective stability. According to Eliot, tradition at the time of his writing is something of an amorphous concept. This lends a degree of pliability to the concept even before it is altered by a new contribution. "Tradition" is an apparatus onto which a version of the past can be charted that renders a preferred response desirable. Eliot's tradition operates as a touchstone with which to create a distinct model of the past and

[78] Eliot, 54.
[79] Eliot, 50.
[80] Eliot, 50.

anchor himself in it. The resulting picture of modernity is determined by the tradition that he asserts. Once made, Eliot conceals this determination in the assumptions of universality that so often underlie early modernist theory. The poet, Eliot argues, "can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus." Tradition is extracted from the past through determinations made by the artist. These determinations, however, must not constitute "one or two private admirations, nor … one preferred period … The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations."[81] The artist envisions tradition as a continuity, a narrative through-line that links past to present. The selection of valid points of contact is not a matter for consensus: "distinguished reputations" are no indicator. At the same time, it cannot be a purely subjective choice, as a small collection of "private admirations" is also forbidden. The standard by which the tradition is extracted from the "indiscriminate bolus" is unclear. But at the same time, Eliot's assertion of the "main current" suggests an absoluteness to the conclusion. The phrase posits a singular, genuine tradition and grants it primacy. A privileged knowledge of the past replaces both consensus and subjective response, or perhaps finds some indeterminate balance between them.

What Eliot leaves unsaid is that the tradition into which the poet enters, and the nature of the poet's response, are mutually constitutive. Each constitutes an act of interpretation on the past vis a vis the present, which is concealed by its agreement with the other. The perceived shape, character, and value assigned to the tradition in part determine the meaning of a given artistic response. Likewise, the value and meaning

[81] Eliot, 51.

assigned to a given response alter our understanding of the tradition among and against which we judge it. The set of works that comprise a tradition shape the narrative at the end of which a new work of art locates itself, and reshapes what has come before. Eliot gestures toward this operation in his idea of tradition. If you allow that tradition creates the artistic order, he says, you must also allow "that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present by the past." And yet, the new "must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past."[82] What he does not acknowledge is that this mutual determinism destabilizes both poles of the interaction. The "the main current" of artistic history that Eliot describes is in fact a product of selection. His earlier reference to a "reconstruction" of tradition reminds us that every such reconstruction is, in fact, a construction undertaken in light of what is now known. The writers of the past, Eliot says "are that which we know."[83] But this declaration understates the precarious nature of this knowledge with its apparent surety. Post-structuralism has since reminded us of the unstable foundations on which knowledge rests. Eliot argues, for example, that "Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum."[84] Meant, it seems, to emphasize the completeness with which a true artist apprehends the past, the statement actually undermines such certainties. If we ask what constitutes "essential" history, we recognize that both Plutarch and the British Museum represent constructed imperial histories. They differ in scale and distance from the present. Both, however, reflect the ultimate malleability of history, rather than its essential nature. Narratives of tradition, and consequently the meaning and

[82] Eliot, 50.
[83] Eliot, 52.
[84] Eliot, 52.

worth of artistic works that enter into history, are deeply inflected by such determinations as these.

Eliot conceals the determinations that underlie this model of tradition with universalizing language. The tradition (that is, the tradition he identifies as the "main current") is the tradition because it reflects and embodies the collective consciousness of the western world. At the same time, it tautologically reflects and embodies this collective consciousness because it is the genuine tradition:

> [The poet] must be aware that the mind of Europe – the mind of his own country – a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind – is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*.[85]

The ever-accumulating "mind of Europe" concretizes the metanarrative from which tradition is said to manifest. It is conceptualized here as a process of expansion, rather than of movement from one artifact to the next, but nonetheless reflects similar principles. Each addition enacts a transformation, however minute, on all that came before, and is acted on in turn by subsequent additions. Collective consciousness imbues the chosen tradition with authority. Pericles Lewis argues that for modernist novelists "the idea of a national consciousness … lent an apparently eternal, if not universal, significance to their isolated experiences." This ideal "offered a matrix through which to interpret events that otherwise appeared to lack any internal logic."[86] The idea of a collective consciousness replaced God as the presence that leant meaning to the arc of history, at a time when previous models seemed incapable of explaining the events being witnessed. By casting the collection of works which constitute his tradition in national

[85] Eliot, 51. Italics in the original.
[86] Lewis, Pericles. *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 5.

and civilizational terms, Eliot asserts an authenticity that is immune to interrogation. The work is no longer a subjective response to local historical and cultural conditions; it is the latest entry in the accumulating artistic production of the western world.

In the years since the peak of high modernism's influence, leftist critics have called such universalizing rhetoric into question. Such language, they argue, merely conceals historical contingency by alienating the work from the conditions of its creation. Modernism (and by extension, modernist scholarship) had by the mid-twentieth century been robbed of its innovative potency, becoming an institution in its own right. In "The Ideology of Modernism," György Lukács observes that such abstraction from concrete, local realities goes hand-in-hand with an overriding critical concern with formal qualities. Modernism participates in what he calls a "negation of history" that understands and represents history as a largely static phenomenon.[87] In doing so, it abandons what he calls "the selective principle" – that is, the subjectivity of a singular perspective. Modernism "asserts that it can dispense with [the selection principle], or can replace it with its dogma of the *condition humane*" (the universal human condition).[88] This is made sustainable, however, only by critical practices that separate the work from its historic specificity in favor of purely formal concerns. Revising and expanding on Lukács, Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* reads in high modernism a repression of history. Political and economic conditions are "relentlessly driven underground by accumulated reification."[89] Originating in an attempt to navigate the demands of new experiences and forms of

[87] Lukács, György. "The Ideology of Modernism," *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd ed. Ed. David H. Richter. (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006), 1220.
[88] Lukács, 1226.
[89] Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 280.

consciousness that comprised modernity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, high modernism occluded its historical origins through its pursuit of a purely symbolic order. Restoring cultural and historical specificity has been a powerful tool in recent work dedicated to opening the modernist canon. By highlighting the local origins of such central works, we are made aware that they represent one of many available responses to modernity.

Prior to such objections, however, Eliot's model of the artist and tradition shaped the critical conversation surrounding modernism. If Eliot's construction of the modern artist is driven by the need to navigate the tension of modernity, then the purely translational character of his ideal artist reflects the need to defend his artistic project in the context of a modernity which saw stability give way to uncertainty. In the character of the genuine tradition (however unstable such an ideal might have been) the national/western consciousness acted as an authorizing figure in place of God. It located the authority in the artist who was seen to access to the essential human experience. The artist was cast as a conduit for this essence. The subjective determinations made by the artist, the specificities of the conditions in which they worked, are concealed by the ideal of universality. Schools of criticism that later emerged from these theories carried on the assumption of an absolute "condition humane." The critics who would come to lionize Eliot and his cohorts naturally, therefore, identified the characteristics of high modernism as *the* qualities of definitively modern literature.

Consolidating and Enforcing Modernism

By the time of *The Lord of the Rings*'s publication, modernism had lost its original iconoclastic status. In the intervening decades, it had become, as F. R. Leavis describes, a "public institution, a part of the establishment."[90] A small but still varied set of works was united into what was called "modernism" by the argument that they collectively represented a singular, transformed relationship to history which constituted the modern. This claim was upheld by the identification of various that were seen to inherently signal this relationship. These traits, largely characterized by formal experimentation, are conspicuously absent in Tolkien's work. Thus, by the time the trilogy was published, the critical landscape was exceptionally ill-equipped to assimilate a fantastic legendarium into its understanding of modern literature. As modernism made its way to the forefront of literary studies, critics sought ways to conceptualize it as a comprehensive, teachable movement. In part, this meant finding a way to "articulate a clear set of conditions for valorizing certain works," which in the case of the New Critics meant "connecting modernism to other great works."[91]

Though true consensus was never in prospect, by the time Tolkien's work became widely known, there existed a general, if not always compatible, set of identifiers believed to mark a text as modern. The method by which these identifiers were established reflected theoretical underpinnings established by Eliot. By the 1950s, the critical project was essentially retrospective. Studies like *The Modern Tradition* and *The*

[90] Leavis, F. R. "Retrospect 1950," *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 220.
[91] Latham and Rogers, 19.

Great Tradition began to theorize modernist works within the tradition. These texts imagined modernism as an essentially closed movement, and sought to define its parameters and effects by locating it firmly in literary history. They lent primacy to modernist works by locating them at the end of a continuous literary genealogy, thereby establishing them as the (most recent) climax in the narrative of western literature. The chosen works inhabit the modern moment as the culmination and revitalization of that which came before. This has the effect of investing the chosen works with a singular modernity. In contrast to Eliot's model, however, in which genuine tradition is accessed by the singular mind of an author possessed of "the historical sense," critical work amounted to an attempt to ground this tradition in consensus. The modernist canon invests with the authority of critical consensus a singular literary tradition which has, at its terminus, the works of the high modernists. Their privileged position at the center of the modern moment excludes those works which are not granted canonicity, and implicitly casts them as in some way less modern.

As critical work on high modernism proliferated, critics began to identify a set of shared practices that distinguished modernist writing and marked it as modern. Rather than advancing discrete arguments for every text under consideration as "modern," these traits enabled the imaginative consolidation of the movement as a coherent whole by signifying a text's modernity. They stood in for the fraught relationship with the past that shaped contemporary impressions of the modern. In part because his work does not display these traits, it was natural to conclude that Tolkien represented a contrary, anti-modern position. A thorough exploration of the ways in which modernism was delineated and defined in the first half of the century is beyond the goals of this argument. Such

work has been extensively undertaken by others, and moreover, any attempt to settle on a single definition of modernism is unlikely to be successful. Identifiers of modernity in a text were manifold, subject to disagreement, and rarely found all together in the same text. Though, as Latham and Rogers note, Eliot's The Waste Land features all or nearly all such characteristics, and is, in many ways, the prototypical modernist poem. Modernism, they suggest, "constellated around" the poem, further emphasizing Eliot's influence on both the theory and practice that defined modernism in the first half of the century in much the same way that the fantasy genre formed around *The Lord of the Rings*.[92] Rather than attempting a comprehensive analysis, therefore, I will briefly consider two characteristics commonly found in critical studies of the modernist canon that was forming during this time: experimentation, and difficulty. By "experimentation," I refer broadly to the strategies employed by high modernists to thwart traditional reading practices and express an aesthetic for the chaotic present – innovation of new poetic forms, non-representation, fragmentation of perspective, and so forth. "Difficulty" refers to the related argument that the most distinct feature of modern writing is its tendency to challenge the reader. In some ways, this is the experiential application of modernism's formal complexity – how such complexity, and refusal to adhere to expectations, manifest in the text's interaction with the reader. As we will see, however, this category also relies on elitist assumptions of a superior reader, ultimately concretized in the high/low art dichotomy.

New Beginnings in English Poetry, by F. R. Leavis, concretizes Eliot's theory of the tradition in national terms, situating modern poetry within and against English poetic

[92] Latham and Rogers, 48.

history. This study exemplifies the process by which modernist poetic technique was invested with privileged status by the critical community. Originally published in 1932, it aims to illustrate "in what new ways the present of English poetry must now be seen as related to the past."[93] Leavis argues that his chosen poets, "Eliot, Pound, and Hopkins – together represent a decisive re-ordering of the tradition of English poetry." Leavis acknowledges, however, that the three are quite "unlike … each other."[94] The use of "together" thus highlights the difficulty of this position. The principle through which Leavis unites the three poets is his assertion about their relationship to the tradition that he constructs. To sustain this argument, he is obligated to contend that their heterogeneous practices collectively contribute to a transformation of English literature that is distinctly, even uniquely, modern. Such an argument furthermore requires an exclusive interpretation of modernity on which the responses of the selected authors find especial purchase.

Leavis portrays his chosen poets as a disruptive influence that destabilizes artistic norms and thereby revitalizes the English literary tradition by remaking it for the modern era. His version of modernity is defined by cultural bankruptcy, inherited from Victorian and Edwardian England. The twentieth century, he says, is "an age [with] no serious standards current, no live tradition of poetry, and no public capable of informed and serious interest."[95] Practically speaking, Leavis's modern moment begins with World War I. In his view, by the end of the war Georgian poetics exemplified the stagnation of the English poetic tradition that had dominated the nineteenth century. Unsuited to the

[93] Leavis, 215.
[94] Leavis, 195.
[95] Leavis, 6.

bevy of new realities – "the ways of feeling, the modes of experience" – epitomized by the Great War, English poetry languished in the doldrums.[96] Though he acknowledges "other very important conditions, social, economic, philosophical and so on," he professes to confine himself "as far as possible to those conditions which it rests with the poet and critic to modify."[97] Often, however, poetry and criticism function as a synecdoche for national culture. For Leavis W. B. Yeats is the exemplar of this condition. His Yeats is a poet with roots in the romantic tradition, but one who has come to recognize its impotence under modern conditions. Lacking a living poetics, Yeats responds with disillusion and nostalgia. Leavis concedes that Yeats is responding "against not the poetic tradition, but the general state of civilization and culture." However, he argues, this "implies nothing against holding that if the poetic tradition had been different … he might have brought more of himself to expression."[98] In doing so, Leavis ascribes to his version of tradition fidelity with the broader unfolding of the modern age, effectively granting his interpretation deterministic capacity. English culture as a whole is waiting for a revivification that will be enacted through poetry by his chosen authors, particularly T.S. Eliot.

Just as Eliot's theories serves as a prototype for Leavis's critical framework, his poetry provides the benchmark for the renewal of English poetry. Leavis goes so far as to locate in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* "a complete break with the nineteenth-century tradition, and a new start." It constitutes, he argues, "poetry that expresses freely a modern sensibility, the ways of feeling, the modes of experience, of one fully alive in

[96] Leavis, 76.
[97] Leavis, 7.
[98] Leavis, 48.

his own age."[99] *The Waste Land*, however, exemplifies Eliot's transformative effect, and epitomizes his aesthetic theories. Leavis argues that the poem, which unites imagery of the No Man's Land with ancient tropes of the eastern and western worlds, best represents the fractured conditions of modernity. Again, this argument replicates Eliot's theoretical principles. In describing the poem's significance, Leavis both unites it firmly with the modern moment, universalizes the condition, and echoes Eliot's historical method:

> What is the significance of the modern Waste Land? The answer may be read in what appears as the rich disorganization of the poem … [and] the wealth of literary borrowings and illusions. These characteristics reflect the present state of civilization. The traditions and cultures have mingled, and the historical imagination makes the past contemporary. [100]

Leavis maps Eliot's model of tradition and modernity onto *The Waste Land*. In doing so, he assigns to it a privileged affinity with the modern world. The characteristics of the poem, he says "reflect the present state of civilization." Because Eliot's critical model frames the poem, its poetic methods are rendered instructive in the context of tradition versus modernity. The justification for valorizing Eliot rests on establishing him as supremely modern, as manifesting uniquely the tension between past and present that constituted this modern moment. Eliot's criticism provides a framework to do just that.

Because Leavis uses Eliot's criticism and poetry to confirm one another, the mutual interpretive act shared between them is rendered invisible. Thus, the resultant picture of modernity takes on the appearance of objective certainty, and therefore universality. This reflects the broader practices of many early critics of high modernism, who tended to apply the modernists' self-described intent unproblematically to their works. Michael Edward Kaufmann has critiqued the over-reliance of Leavis (and others)

[99] Leavis, 75-76.
[100] Leavis, 90-91.

on Eliot's own notes on *The Waste Land*, particularly the credulity with which they were read. Eliot, he argues, was motivated to create his tradition as the national consciousness that he sought to channel. This moved him to portray the accomplishments of writers like James Joyce as part of the same movement, despite the differences in their methods.[101] In effect, by consolidating modernism as an aesthetic movement, Eliot endowed his iconoclastic "historical sense" with the legitimacy of critical consensus. He appears, from the retrospective position of critics looking back, to have anticipated the consciousness of his age, rather than having provided its dominant interpretive framework. (Vincent Sherry has made this argument as recently as 2003, though modified to incorporate the influence wielded by high modernists through the critical and artistic communities.)[102] Kaufmann demonstrates that scholars not only utilized Eliot's theoretical framework, but "depended on [his] notes for interpreting" *The Waste Land*: "Having formulated their concept of Modernism from Eliot's precepts … the New Critics tautologically pointed back to these works as proof of their definition."[103] This included influential figures such as Leavis, I. A. Richards, and Cleanth Brooks, who would play major roles in establishing critical discourse in the first half of the century. They went on to enforce this orthodoxy in the academy. The particular interpretation of modernity by a small group of authors (or even one) was thus granted the authority of critical consensus.

Connecting a given historical model of modernity meaningfully with the works of selected modernist authors required critics to identify textual characteristics that could be

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[101] Kaufmann, Michael Edward. "T. S. Eliot's New Critical Footnotes to Modernism." *Rereading the New: A Backward Glance at Modernism*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 80.
[102] Sherry, 19-20.
[103] Kaufmann, 81.

seen to signify the requisite relationship with the past. These reflect the aesthetic practices I have broadly termed experimentation: fragmentation, formal irregularity, novelty. By virtue of their contrast to the Romantic and Georgian poetic traditions, these features were seen to represent a modernity that was experienced by many as chaotic and alienating. This, Leavis tells us, and not "by mentioning modern things, the apparatus of modern civilization, or by being about modern subjects," is how a text will identify itself as modern.[104] The connection between experimentation and modernity, observable in the chosen authors, is generalized by critics and applied instructively to contemporary literary practice generally:

> We have … considered the poet as being at the conscious point of his age. There are ways in which it is possible to be too conscious; and to be so is, as a result of the break-up of forms and the loss of axioms noted above, one of the troubles of the present age … We recognize in modern literature the accompanying sense of futility.[105]

The generalization of Eliot's historical sense ascribes an exclusivity to the relationship between the technical features of a text and its capacity to address the modern world. The "break-up of forms and loss of axioms" appears to be a direct manifestation of the modern condition within the text, rather than the products of an interpretive act.

By silencing the interpretation implicit high modernism, and universalizing its tenets, Leavis negates the possibility of alternative interpretations. Authors like Tolkien, whose practices differed, were necessarily understood to be retrogressive, and antimodern. For example, Leavis briefly addresses Edmund Blunden, a soldier-poet of the Great War, and one of the memoirists I will examine in the next chapter. Blunden,

[104] Leavis, 24.
[105] Leavis 93-94.

Leavis tells us, "has some genuine talent, and is an interesting case."[106] Leavis ultimately dismisses him, however, because his technique is at odds with the high modernists, who are otherwise his contemporaries. Indeed, Blunden's relative success is portrayed as an exception that proves the rule, a curiosity that further strengthens the Eliot-derived model of tradition. Blunden, "conservative in technique," is able "to draw upon the eighteenth century, because the immemorial order that is doomed was real to him. It is not likely that a serious poet will be traditional in that way again."[107] To sustain his analytic framework, Leavis is obliged to apply hierarchical and chronological qualifiers to Blunden's work. Blunden is, after all, a contemporary of Eliot and Pound. He does not share their practices; therefore in order to sustain an all-encompassing historical model which posits a bankrupt tradition, Leavis must conclude that Blunden will be the last "serious" poet to practice his methods. In fact, he goes further and suggests Blunden is "at any rate significant enough to show up the crowd of Georgian pastoralists," establishing a clear hierarchy among the Georgian poets, Blunden, and the modernists, with the high modernists on top.[108] The textual features of the high modernists are intertwined with standards of timeliness, novelty, and quality. To lack these features is to be less modern, less appropriate to the time, and therefore inferior – even backwards.

Contemporaneous texts that failed to exhibit the requisite features of modern literature had to be something else in order to avoid destabilizing the category. The high/low art dichotomy fulfilled this function. To sustain the singular valorization of high modernism as the only appropriate response to modernity, critics had to find justification

[106] Leavis, 66.
[107] Leavis, 68.
[108] Leavis, 68.

for the exclusion of, as Latham and Rogers put it, "the enormous diversity of twentieth-century art and literature."[109] Andreas Huyssen argues that this process reflects "an anxiety of contamination by [modernism's] other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture."[110] The low art category provided a repository for art that did not display the characteristics established by modernism. The division emerged in part from high modernism's principle of autonomy – the paradoxical separation of the art object from its political environment. This allowed the lion's share of cultural production to be relegated to the category of mass culture. Marxist critics like Theodor Adorno would later argue that this division reflected the ability of non-representative modern art to confound the uncritical consumption that was associated with mass culture. By estranging the subject from reality, he reasoned, modern art had the potential to suggest genuine alternatives to a world order defined by the capitalist system.[111] But the boundary between low and high art was initially constituted in terms of sophistication.

Critical discourse surrounding the high/low art dichotomy stratified oppositional traits like difficulty vs. clarity, the sophisticated vs. plain reader, and maturity vs. childishness, and aligned them in support of high modernist aesthetic principles. To be modern was to embrace difficulty and the sophisticated reader; to be otherwise was to be antiquated, and thus consigned to the category of low art. As early as 1927, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, by Laura Redding and Robert Graves, explicitly identified difficulty – that is, a perceptible increase in challenge posed to the reader – as a defining characteristic of modern poetry. This study is one of the earliest to refer in print to the

[109] Latham and Rogers, 8.
[110] Huyssen, vi.
[111] Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 9.

poetry of Eliot's coterie as "modernism." Nonetheless, it is already engaged in justifying the exclusion of other contemporary writing. Redding and Graves contextualize this emergence of difficulty as a guiding aesthetic principle by exploring its relationship to the works of the past. Here, the past is personified by what they call "traditional poetry:"

> poetry not characteristically "modernist" presents no difficulty for the plain reader; for the complaint against modernist poetry turns on its differences from traditional poetry.[112]

The traditional strain against which Redding and Graves define modernism here is not Eliot's sprawling western tradition, but the more recent practices of Victorian poetry. (It should be noted, however, that the tradition Eliot articulates largely omits the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, arguably as a tactic to liberate his work from the standards of their practices.)[113] Victorian poetry, they argue "domesticat[ed] itself in order to be received into the homes of the ordinary reading public," and as a result grew "so tame, so dull, that it ceased to compete with other forms of social entertainment."[114] Modernist technique is defended as a response against this tendency.

This perceived deficiency of sophistication is levied as an accusation of sorts against the reading habits of a projected general public. Redding and Graves's argument relies on the concept of "the plain reader" – a hypothetical untrained, casual consumer of poetry. This is the reader who has learned reading habits from "domesticated" Victorian poetry. With their readerly habits stuck in the past, the plain reader is unprepared to engage modern works: "even traditional poetry, it is sometimes charged, has a tendency to withdraw itself from the plain reader. But the sophistications of advanced modern

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[112] Redding, Laura, and Robert Graves. *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. (Edinburgh: The Folcroft Press, 1971), 9.
[113] Latham and Rogers, 39-40.
[114] Redding and Graves, 110.

poetry seem only to make the breach wider."[115] Because modern poetry is conceived as a progressive response to traditional poetry, it is described as "advanced." Consequently, those elements which obscure meaning from the reader are "sophistications." If modernist poetry is characterized by its inaccessibility, it is therefore also set within a presumed hierarchy of sophistication. In this framework, the modern text is the standard, and the traditional text is regressive. Likewise, the reader who prefers a text perceived as traditional (in form or content) is necessarily perceived as unsophisticated.

The high art/low art structure was essential to the elevation of high modernists to the status of literary exemplars. But it depended on this fundamentally elitist distinction between the expert and common reader. Leavis asserts that the "ordinary cultivated reader" has ceased "to be able to read poetry." But unlike Redding and Graves, his culprit is not regressive Victorianism. Rather, Leavis blames mass culture itself. He attributes the lack of sophistication to "the perpetual avalanche of print," against which the public "has had to acquire reading habits that incapacitate [them] when the signals for unaccustomed and subtle responses present themselves."[116] Although they disagree on the proximate cause, Redding, Graves, and Leavis concur that the average English reader is in some way deficient. Thus, the high modernists' iconoclasm is justified; a reader (or writer) who favors other practices is merely the victim of their own lack of sophistication. By aligning high modernist practices with sophistication, maturity, and progress, critics permitted themselves to dismiss the vast majority of written mass culture as irrelevant. Those texts which did not meet the established criteria were delegitimized, as were their readers. (The delegitimization of fantasy literature would later be carried out along

[115] Redding and Graves, 9.
[116] Leavis, 213.

similar grounds, dismissing it as "childish" or "juvenile.") Despite representing a relatively small amount of the contemporary cultural production, high modernism came to be regarded as the representative interpretation of its time.

The universalizing principle of artistic autonomy subjected all cultural production to the standards of high modernism by concealing the limits and subjectivities of the high modernist perspective. By elevating high modernism to the pinnacle of contemporary culture, critical discourse effectively silenced a considerable portion of contemporary English experiences by delegitimizing writing that sought to represent them. By consigning writing that failed to practice high modernist technique to the all-encompassing, all-marginalizing categories of "low art" and "mass culture," critics concretized and enforced the impression that high modernism represented the only credible interpretation of twentieth-century modernity. Alternative perspectives could be written off as inferior, behind the times, and thus unworthy of consideration. The best a contrary author could hope for was the grudging acknowledgement of talent, combined with the assertion of ultimate irrelevance, that Edmund Blunden received from Leavis.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, critics began teasing out some of the limits of the modernist canon and the ways in which they shaped the understanding of modernity that it conveyed. Scholars have observed that high modernism was uniformly male, white, and addressed from the colonial center. Paul Fussell and Jay Winter have argued that the exclusively civilian perspective of the English high modernists creates a key limitation in a period that was deeply affected by the military action of the Great War.[117] Allen Frantzen and Elizabeth Vandiver have more explicitly argued against the

[117] Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2000).

model of a defunct tradition, reinvigorated by the high modernists. They suggest that high modernism's prominence has concealed the fact that, for the majority population of the "plain reader," the tradition remained vital even into high modernism's heyday. In 1986, Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide* dismantled the high/low art apparatus that justified the excision of mass culture from the modernist canon, and which sustained so many of the attendant exclusions. Huyssen argues that mass culture was separated from modernism precisely because it threatened to undermine the perceived universality ascribed to high modernism's version of modernity. The obscurity and difficulty of high modernist technique served mainly to give the appearance of separation from mass culture and everyday life. The advent of postmodernism, however, rendered the distinction meaningless. As a result of these scholars and others, the modernist canon has expanded to include the diverse and often incompatible perspectives of those authors whose modern experiences were not represented by the high modernists, as well as forms rejected by the practitioners of high modernism. The effect has been to divest high modernism of much of its prescriptive power. "Modernism" has taken on a meaning that we might call kaleidoscopic. It shifts and changes, depending on the angle from which one views it, seemingly oriented around a stable core and yet apparently remade by the moment as one's perspective changes.

What is curious, therefore, and the question I will take up in the next section of this chapter, is why this expanding canonical inclusion continues to be withheld from J. R. R. Tolkien, particularly given the scope of his influence. Tolkien, it practically goes without saying, is low art. Romantic narrative, straightforwardly told, has little apparent

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Winter, Jay. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

affinity with the practices of high modernism. Likewise, the idea of fantasy connotes an escapism much like Leavis accuses Edmund Blunden of indulging in. It is easy to see why scholars rejected Tolkien on the initial publication of his work. But despite the recent dissolution of the high/low art dichotomy, he remains largely unexamined as a contemporary of the modernists. This is in part because his work remains so difficult to integrate into narratives of twentieth century literary criticism. Lacking historical grounding, *The Lord of the Rings* still seems to emerge as if from nowhere. Without returning it to its historical context, we lack the ability to recognize in Tolkien another interpretation of his time, to place him within the kaleidoscope of modernism.

Fantasy as a Modern Phenomenon

Fantasy's exclusion from the legitimacy enjoyed by this literary elite was largely achieved by imaginatively disconnecting it from its roots in twentieth-century modernity. In the critical discourse that was constructed around high modernism, fantasy literature is not generative; it speaks to and reflects primarily itself. Describing the relationship between *The Lord of the Rings* and modern fantasy, Edward James asserts that it "looms over all the fantasy written in English." Tolkien is something like an overbearing parent: "most subsequent writers of fantasy are either imitating him or else desperately trying to escape his influence."[118] The binary James creates – either bland imitation or desperate escape – neatly illustrates the gap that persists between genre and mainstream literature. Eliot asserts the transformative capability of the artist on the material of their

[118] James, 62.

predecessors in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," as does Ezra Pound with his famous imperative to "make it new." James, however, identifies no space for this positive, generative model of influence; writers following in Tolkien's footsteps must be either imitating him or rejecting him. Moreover, this dichotomy is inflected by established values of each possibility. Shallow imitation carries the presumption of inferior artistry, while resistance to one's predecessors suggestions a denial of the precursor text's value. Remember also that this dynamic is appearing in the work of a critic who is sympathetic to the value of modern fantasy. But, because it operates within the strictures of a critical history that resists the place of fantasy in modern literary discourse, it lacks the tools to positively interpret Tolkien's literary practices.

If modernism grew initially through the imaginative extrapolation and application of the high modernist movement's self-declared principles, the modern fantasy genre was constructed retrospectively. It has become almost a cliché at this point to begin a book-length study of the genre by taking up the problem of how to define fantasy. Farah Mendlesohn has said that critics tend to "pick and choose" among various definitions of fantasy, depending on "the area of fantasy fiction, or the ideological filter, in which they are interested." Rarely if ever do scholars simply point to a stable definition with which they agree.[119] This is a symptom of the way that the fantasy genre took shape. Brian Attebery describes nearly all modern definitions of fantasy as "descriptions after the fact; that is, the critic assembles a body of texts that somehow seem to fit the term and describes the common feature or features."[120] Contrast this with our examination of how modernism was consolidated, above. The body of works that were understood as

[119] Mendlesohn, xiii.
[120] Attebery, *Strategies*, 12.

"modernist" are defined outwardly. A set of principles, received from Eliot and other practitioners of the movement, comes first. Through their application (however uneven it may be) a body of texts is selected. Fantasy, however, is defined retrospectively. A body of works which "seem somehow to fit" are selected first, and standards are derived from them. The standards, clearly, will vary wildly with the selection of texts. But because of its retrospective construction, the genre appears to be static. The texts have been selected according to perceived similarities before an evaluation takes place. This hinders our ability to conceive of modern fantasy in conversation with something other than itself. Because common traits are derived from a set of texts, those traits which disrupt the unity of the set are less likely to be remarked upon, as they tell us less about the group as a whole. On the other hand, commonalities with (for example) modernism are likely to be suppressed. Modernism is thus seen to emerge through meaningful response to the external world that manifests in its characteristic experimentation, whereas fantasy is understood merely to share a set of static traits. It is thus almost impossible to mount a defense of fantasy (an act which, of course, presumes the need for defense) outside the terms of the discourses it is being defended against.

The critical conversation surrounding *The Lord of the Rings* manifests the effects of this self-reflective definition. The influence of *LotR* is so pervasive that most critical discussions concerning "fantasy" are, to some degree or other, about this text. Attebery has described it as the "mental template" of fantasy for readers in English.[121] Given the

[121] Attebery, *Strategies*, 14. Edward James traces the text's influence on the genre as a whole in "Tolkien, Lewis, and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy." My concern here is the implications of this relationship on the critical conversation, and the opportunity it creates to examine the texts that precede this imaginative point of origin. As such, I am concerned here primarily with establishing the relationship between *The Lord of the Rings* and the modern fantasy genre, not with dissecting it.

extent of its publication, we might suggest the same for other languages as well. The presents a problem which Attebery does not quite acknowledge, however. Namely, any discussion of *The Lord of the Rings* as modern fantasy is complicated by the fact that the genre is incomprehensible outside the terms of *The Lord of the Rings*. The examination of *LotR* as an example of fantasy is tautological, almost redundant. Moreover, it illustrates the problems created by the genre's historical dislocation. Studying *The Lord of the Rings* as an example of the fantasy genre ignores the reality that the genre (as we conceive of it now) did not exist to be participated in when Tolkien wrote. It was only subsequently developed in response to and in the context of Tolkien's own work. On the other hand, if the current genre coalesced around *LotR*, a study of the text's history could offer insight into the genre's construction, particularly as it relates to its imaginative and discursive separation from mainstream literature. But in the case of *LotR*, the text's origins predate the text itself – a fact whose consequences have often gone unexamined. *The Lord of the Rings* emerges from – and was imagined and composed in the context of – a larger body of texts. The composition of this larger body began in and around Tolkien's time as a signal officer in the First World War. The text of *LotR* (and the influence it enjoys on the fantasy genre) is inflected, sometimes invisibly, through the lens of this ongoing creative project.

The critical tendency to overlook the connections between Tolkien's writing and the Great War is in part the result of his texts' publication history. Tolkien's work was published (nearly) in the opposite order of its completion. *The Silmarillion*, mostly composed prior to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, was published in 1977 – more than twenty years after *The Return of the King*. The original, and in some cases still the

most complete versions of the legendarium were published later still. Many of these saw posthumous publication as incomplete, heavily-edited manuscripts. By the time the lion's share of Tolkien's work became available, scholarly consensus had already settled his reputation based on prescriptive standards that took no account of him. The result is that Tolkien criticism (and consequently, scholarship on modern fantasy) has at times an oddly a-chronological bent. For example, consider Colin Manlove's *Modern Fantasy* – published in 1978, one of the earliest scholarly studies of both the modern fantasy genre and Tolkien in particular. Manlove draws conclusions roughly in keeping with what we would expect when subjecting *The Lord of the Rings* to critical standards established by studies of high modernism: the text represents a reaction against the modern, it is nostalgic, retrogressive, and so on.[122] Despite the space he dedicates to Tolkien, however, consideration of the larger body of work is limited to two mentions:

> Tolkien was however able to begin writing "The Silmarillion" when invalided out from the Somme in 1916.

And

> Behind this, The Silmarillion' continued and one day (it seems to have been in 1930) while in the midst of the 'agony' of marking exam scripts for extra money, Tolkien turned to a blank page in an exam book and wrote, 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.'[123]

While, in the first instance, Manlove acknowledges the close connections between the work's genesis and the events of the Somme, he considers the implications of this relationship no further. Later, *The Silmarillion* is presented merely as pretext to *The Hobbit*, barely more than a footnote to provide bibliographical data. In fact, the textual history suggests that *The Hobbit*'s connection to the legendarium was built in

[122] Manlove, 206.
[123] Manlove, 154.

retroactively. In the earliest design, the relationship was limited to the borrowing of names. Ironically, therefore, Manlove's formulation of an incidental relationship between the two was technically correct, but not for the reasons he imagined. Manlove is writing here in 1975, two years before the publication of *The Silmarillion*. His formulation is not the result of critical oversight; the material was simply not available to him. As a result, however, a foundational text on the modern fantasy genre draws conclusions about its foundational practitioner without knowledge of the full text, and without theorizing its origins or its modern context.

Implicit in this argument is the belief that Tolkien's work, unified as it is by a single fictional continuity, is most appropriately read as one immense text. This is complicated at many points by the existence of multiple, sometimes contradictory versions, and greater weight must naturally be given to those selected for publication. Undeniably, however, certain themes persist. The texts are meant to be read in context of one another, to reflect and resonate with one another more directly than two unconnected works from the same author. An analysis which lacks this context is at times doomed to misinterpretations, some of which fundamentally misconstrue the nature of the text's various figures. For example, Manlove's discussion of immortality (and consequently time) in *The Lord of the Rings* is determined largely by a lack of full knowledge of the text:

> To heighten [a sense of the wearing action of time], Tolkien has given varying degrees of longevity to the different races: hobbits live at most 130 years, mortal men can live more (Aragorn dies at 190), dwarves have a maximum of 250, Elves live much longer – indeed the High elves or Eldar have been granted 'immortality within the walls of the world' … All of them are in one way or another mortal: though the elves do not die naturally, they can be slain (as was Elendil at the battle of Dagorlad) or their purpose in continuing to live in Middle-Earth can fade (as happens

> with the destruction of the Ring). The Ents devolve through time into trees; even Bombadil would be overthrown if Sauron recovered the Ring.[124]

While one of the misconceptions in this selection is the product of careless reading (Elendil was not an elf) most simply result from incomplete access to the fictional context in which the assertions are made. Briefly: hobbits seem to be of a type with mortal men; Aragon's lifespan is not usual but a result of his own remarkable history; all elves are immortal, not only high elves; elves are *not* slain, strictly speaking, not at least in the same final way as humans; the fading of the high elves is not a result of the Ring, rather the rings held off a natural process; and the change of Ent to tree is not conceptualized as a devolution. The context needed to interpret these elements are contained not within *The Lord of the Rings*, but in earlier materials like *The Silmarillion*, from which the later texts are derived.

No one of Manlove's misapprehensions here is damning. In fact, most are reasonable interpretations of the material, given the partial access to the text that Manlove (as well as the reading public) had. Taken as a whole, however, they produce a misreading of Tolkien's interpretations of both death and time – two of the most prevalent themes in his work. This reading misses, for example, that the difference between the life and death of men and elves is a matter of type, rather than quantity. Also, Tolkien's conception of time is strictly material; consistently throughout his work, time is wedded in one way or another to the physical processes of the world. This is emphasized by the presence of a metaphysical plane that stands outside of both time and the material world. Without access to the material that establishes these principles, Manlove asserts

[124] Manlove, 172.

that the features he describes exist to heighten "a sense of mortality and the wearing action of time."[125] He interprets them, in other words, as markers of anti-modern nostalgia, signifying a desire to return to a fuller time located in some indistinct past. They appear to represent a straightforward degeneration from a previous golden age, to which the author longs to return. While seemingly reasonable, this conclusion is symptomatic of the retrospective process by which modern fantasy is defined. Manlove identifies prominent features of the text, but lacks the historical context to explain why and how they developed. He therefore diagnoses their function according to the terms established by modernist criticism. In these terms, the text appears to be resurrecting old forms in the interest of wish-fulfillment, rather than critique. The features Manlove identifies, as well as the outmoded form and seemingly antiquated content, appear to be reactions against modernism, because it is not apparent that they developed contemporaneously with modernism. Because the assumptions that underlie Manlove's critical approach prescribe a particular response to modernity, his analysis cannot allow the text to stake its own claim on the experience. In many ways, this would provide the model for much of the later criticism of the genre.

When the text's twentieth-century origins are acknowledged, they are often used as a means of attack, rather than a point for consideration. In these instances, we can observe the antagonistic nature of the assumptions that underlie a prescriptive model of modern literature. This antagonism persists even outside the discourse of the academy. Consider this critique of Tolkien by Richard Morgan (himself a fantasy author):

> The great shame is, of course, that Tolkien was not able (or inclined) to mine this vein of experience [WWI] for what it was really worth … I suppose it's partially understandable – the generation who fought in the

[125] Manlove, 172.

> First World War got to watch every archetypal idea they had about Good and Evil collapse in reeking bloody ruin around them. It takes a lot of strength to endure something like that and survive, and then to re-draw your understanding of things to fit the uncomfortable reality you've seen. Far easier to retreat into simplistic nostalgia for the faded or forgotten values you used to believe in.[126]

From the retrospective position, Tolkien's interpretation of the events of his own life is incorrect, because the standard modernist interpretation has been upheld, legitimized, and enacted exclusively for decades since. In other words, the critical discourse that has been constructed in the intervening years invites, and, from some perspectives, necessitates Morgan's critique. His complaint echoes the early assertions of Graves and Redding. It assumes the sophistication of a particular response, and therefore the childishness of those who would indulge another. Morgan even suggests that ages twelve to fourteen strike him as "about the right age to read and enjoy [Tolkien's] stuff."[127] But this is not a mid-century scholar passing judgment; rather, it is a fellow writer of modern fantasy! This reflects the pervasiveness and persistence of such broadly-held beliefs concerning the nature and value of literature; Morgan seems almost to echo Redding and Graves, some eighty years later. These truisms are available as an easy means of critique, but they decline to account for the process by which alternative writing practices developed alongside high modernism. Most importantly, they preclude the critical examination of these texts by reducing them to their simplest, most binary form. They elide the possibility that Tolkien's work is not so easily reduced to good versus evil, that it is about the experiences in question, because – they assume – if it were more complex, it would

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[126] Morgan, Richard K. "The Real Fantastic Stuff," *Unbound Worlds: Exploring the Science Fiction and Fantasy Universe*, last modified February 18, 2009, http://www.unboundworlds.com/2009/02/the-real-fantastic-stuff-an-essay-by-richard-k-morgan/.
[127] Morgan.

be written in the manner understood to signify an appropriate response. Because these texts are unlike the authorized forms of twentieth century literature, that difference is presumed to be the single most important thing about them; they must, therefore, be reactionary in nature.

But another critical discourse more subtly, and arguably more pervasively, separates Tolkien's texts from their time: the model of world-building. I say "more pervasive," because critical concern with world-building as a literary practice appears almost exclusively within criticism of the fantasy genre. The term refers to the construction of a persistent fictional world that serves as a backdrop for fantasy stories. This world ("Arda," in Tolkien's case) maintains continuity between events and provides depth to the narrative setting. The author often provides the world with the trappings of concrete existence, such as histories, maps, locations, characters, and artifacts that do not directly relate to the immediate narrative. Edward James has argued that the invention of world-building was "Tolkien's greatest achievement," adding the important caveat "in retrospect." In retrospect, because world-building "has become so standard in modern fantasy that it is not easy to realize how unusual it was before Tolkien."[128] This creates two problems. First, the ubiquity of the technique among Tolkien's imitators has (as James acknowledges, and as is suggested above) hindered the critic's ability to evaluate the ways it developed prior to its wider adoption. It becomes much more difficult to consider Tolkien in any way except "in retrospect." Second, with the secondary world as the foremost issue under critical consideration, the text's relationship to the real-world conditions of its writing is suppressed. The persistent secondary world means that the text

[128] James, 65.

is capable of providing its own context, via China Mieville's "hermetic totality."[129] It becomes possible, even easier, to consider the text primarily in relation to its own, internal world. The reality that the "world" in question is an element within the text itself is suppressed. This is exacerbated by the text's extreme remove from mimetic practice: the dissimilarity between the secondary and the primary (real) worlds. The text's interactions with the external world, and with its own time, are occluded by critical discourses already inclined to view it as escapist and therefore illegitimate.

Admittedly, the study of the secondary world has the benefit of being supported by Tolkien's own espoused concerns. In his essay, "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien identified as his artistic ambition the creation of a fully-realized and believable fictional world.[130] Moreover, I argue above that critics have been in error by not considering the context provided by Tolkien's wider body of writing. These of course include, and even concern themselves primarily with, the construction of his secondary world. But I make a distinction here in the method of their consideration. My concern is the degree to which critical practice imaginatively separates Tolkien's work from the time and place of its production. A methodology that over-privileges the fictional world and treats it as self-contained equally separates the text from its reality as one that ignores both. In fact, Tolkien conceived of his secondary world not as an abstracted fictional space, but as an imaginative prehistory for our own world. The distinction between Tolkien's fictional construct and the world in which it was composed is nebulous by design; a complete analysis can assume the difference to be neither complete nor irrelevant. James argues that this prehistorical conception "is not sustained, and to all intents and purposes,

[129] *TCatC,* 316.
[130] "On Fairy-Stories," 138-39.

Middle-Earth is a separate creation, operating totally outside the world of our experience." He cryptically acknowledges, however, that the published work "retains the hint" of this formulation.[131] Indeed, the early drafts of Tolkien's work occur within a literal map of Europe. Analogous locations stand in for the modern counterparts. The "Lonely Isle," for example, is an imagined ancient England – right down to an identifiable proto-Warwickshire. Its visitation by Eriol (later Ælfwine), a sailor from the continent, provides the inciting event for the revelation of the secret history that constitutes Tolkien's fictional narrative. Subsequent versions increased the degree of abstraction, until the relationship was diminished to the purely linguistic – what Tom Shippey describes as "a literary calque."[132]

However, while the precise points of connection shifted, this imagined continuity with the living world seems to have persisted until the end of Tolkien's life. After the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, he went so far as to attempt a radical reorganization of his mythic cosmology with the intention of bringing it in line with modern astronomy.[133] Later still, he revisited the concept of a mainland European sailor stumbling into his fantastic world. Despite the imaginative abstraction applied to Arda by this period, the manuscript refers to the translation of his myths into modern English by Ælfwine, complete with reference to Queen Elizabeth I and II.[134] Evidence of these connections is nonetheless largely absent from the popular published material. Other than vague cultural similarities between, for instance, hobbits and Georgian bourgeois or

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[131] James, 65.
[132] Shippey, Tom. *The Road to Middle-Eath: How J. R. R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 101-02.
[133] Tolkien, J. R. R. *Morgoth's Ring: The Later Silmarillion Part One*, Ed. Christopher Tolkien. (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1993), 3-29. The relevant section is referred to as 'Ainulindalë Version C.'
[134] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The War of the Jewels: The Later Silmarillion Part Two*, Ed, Christopher Tolkien. (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1994), 311-15.

Rohan and the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, nothing in *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit* suggests a connection between Middle-Earth and European history. Again, this is partially the result of publication history, and partially the result of the text's construction. *The Silmarillion* was conceived on one level as a document within Tolkien's fictional world, and on another level as a digestible summary of much of what he had previously written. The earliest version of Tolkien's legendarium, *The Book of Lost Tales*, was a more expansive, detailed account. The text presented as a collection of individual, linked stories, rather than a single continuous narrative. Emphasizing their perceived independence, Tolkien would later treat selected individual tales poetically. These included the Lay of Leithien and the Lay of the Children of Hurin. The earliest text referred to as the Silmarillion was written between 1926 and 1930, nearly a decade after the original composition, and was designed to be a brief sketch of the larger mythology.[135] Within the legendarium, the Silmarillion is described as an extant text received by Ælfwine and translated into modern English.[136] *The Silmarillion* thus embodies the connections between Tolkien's fiction and the modern world. However, by the time it was published in 1977, *The Lord of the Rings* had established the fictional space Middle-Earth for the reading public. *The Silmarillion* represented the only complete, publishable version of the legendarium for which there was apparent demand. It was published without the meta-narrative of Ælfwine's translation. Its context and meaning derived retrospectively from *The Lord of the Rings*, which, as we have seen, was already presumed to have no relationship to modernity.

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[135] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Shaping of Middle-Earth: The Evolution of a World*, Ed. Christopher Tolkien. (New York: Ballantine, 1995), 11.
[136] *The Shaping of Middle-Earth*, 251.

Removing *The Silmarillion*'s framing narrative distorts the context in which the reader interprets the text. If the text did in fact portray a purely imaginative history, we would be forced to agree with the distinction Charles Manlove draws between fantasy and science fiction: while "fantasy often draws spiritual nourishment from the past … science fiction is usually concerned with the future and the way we may develop."[137] If, however, we understand Tolkien's fantasy as a fictional interpretation of our own past, then we must see modernity as the implicit imagined endpoint of the narrative writ large. We are invited to consider the ways in which we have developed, how we differ (or not) from the world portrayed in the text, and the ways in which our imagination of the world differs. With the frame in place, it becomes clear that narratives about the past are always about the present. They invite us to project that narrative, and the questions it raises, into the future. The modern moment, composed as it is by the tension between the past and future, denies us the luxury of isolating them from one another. Jameson's argument that fantasy concerns itself the "premodern world alone" is an impossibility. The modern world is present, both within the text and without, at the inception of the modern fantasy genre. Like his contemporaries in the high modernist movement, Tolkien engaged in inventing a past that would confer significance on his work. In Tolkien's case, the past is located in the work itself. The artifice is concealed by the practice of fantasy, which estranges the narrative from historical reality. But as we have seen, the construction of an accommodating past is always a matter of selection and interpretation, and therefore a matter of invention. Tolkien's treatment of the tradition is to transform and overtly reshape its origins in the context of the present. He leaves modernity implicit. In contrast,

[137] Manlove, 8.

Eliot and the high modernists utilize formal experimentation to manifest the modern in the work, allowing it to imply their selected tradition.

The persistence of the perceived disconnection between Tolkien's work and his world contributes to an unusual critical situation. It leads to J. R. R. Tolkien – an author who wrote and published exclusively between the years of 1910 and 1972 – existing frequently as the subject of medieval scholars. The reasons for this are fairly clear. First, while Middle-Earth is imaginatively distinct from the genuinely medieval, it is constructed primarily from the material of medieval texts – dragons, knights, and swords. Moreover, Tolkien's writing seeks in some ways to emulate them. Second, because the discourses surrounding twentieth century literature treat modernism as the natural representative of its time, there is no apparent contradiction in treating Tolkien otherwise. But the resulting conversation at times gives the impression that Tolkien's nearest contemporaries are authors who wrote centuries before he was born. This is visible in the proliferation of source criticism of Tolkien's work. Tom Shippey, for example, introduces *The Road to Middle Earth* by examining the philological inquiries that unearthed the building blocks from which Tolkien derived and shaped his secondary world.[138] Scholarly anthologies such as *J. R. R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances*, and *J. R. R. Tolkien and the Study of His Sources* approach Tolkien by considering the material from which his stories are constructed, much of which is medieval.[139] Similarly, Jane Chance's *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth* contains essays relating Tolkien to

[138] Shippey,
[139] Clark, George, and Daniel Timmons, Ed. *J. R. R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000).
Fisher, Jason, Ed. *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources: Critical Essays*. (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011).

everything from ancient Greek and Latin sources, to Old Norse and Old English.[140] In the absence of twentieth-century scholarly interest in Tolkien, medievalism provides an accredited point of entry into his work. The dominant concern of this approach tends to be the details of the setting, and the sources from which it is composed. In this it is like the discourse of world-building – treating the setting, seemingly in an implicit admission of deficiency elsewhere. The approach clearly does not operate under the misconception that Tolkien's work is a genuine example of a recovered mythology. Nonetheless, the focus on source material tends to create the sense that Tolkien was the contemporary of authors of the medieval and early modern eras, rather than the modernists and the rapidly changing world with which they grappled. In much the same way that fantasy scholarship reads Tolkien in the context of a genre that developed after his time, source criticism reads him in the context of writing produced long before his time. Meanwhile, modernism continues to crowd him out of his own historical moment.

This false synchronicity leaves little room for Tolkien to be read as an author of the early twentieth century, except through the critical norms and practices of modernism, which we have seen are inclined to delegitimize his work in a variety of ways. Ironically, medievalist and genre-based critical approaches emerged in part as an effort to resist this dismissal. They offer alternative points of entry into Tolkien's work, without the trouble of directly attempting to gainsay critical orthodoxy. In some sense, however, this exacerbates the central problem; Tolkien's apparent estrangement from the pressing concerns, traumas, and transformations of his own time. Fantasy scholarship in some ways positions itself as an offshoot, or a special interest. Genre status implicitly concedes

[140] Chance, Jane, Ed. *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004).

that Tolkien is not part of the literary mainstream, regardless of critical work that lays bare the constructed nature of the mainstream. This invites the old critique that his work is escapist, interested in avoiding the challenges of modernity, and therefore irrelevant. Medievalist scholarship imaginatively displaces Tolkien from his time, in an attempt to legitimate his work in terms other than those of the twentieth century. By privileging the context of the sources over that of the text itself, however, these studies similarly concede that Tolkien was not engaged with his own world. In an effort to restore Tolkien to his century, Attebery has suggested the application of alternative, contemporaneous analytic models: replacing structuralism with philology, Freudian psychological analysis with Jungian, and Marxist criticism with ecological theory.[141] However, insisting on these alternatives threatens to further alienate Tolkien from the dominant discourses of twentieth-century literary studies. Such a strategy does little to address the manner in which these norms and values assumed dominance. It similarly offers no opportunity to consider the ways in which their growth and definitions were inflected by the exclusion of writing in the fantastic mode. The value of the new modernist studies is that it asks precisely this question of the various discourses that were marginalized by the valorization of high modernism and its descendants. Therefore, to inscribe Tolkien's work into the narrative of the twentieth century literature, we must first and foremost reestablish its proper synchronicity.

By focusing on the origins of Tolkien's work in the First World War, this study anchors his work in one of the seminal moments both of the century and of modernism. The importance of the war in shaping definitions of modernism has diminished over time.

[141] Attebery, *Strategies*, 27-34.

For early modernist critics, it was a crucial turning point in history; to those who lived through it, the war epitomized many of the upheavals seemed primed to overwhelm European civilization. It was widely seen as a catalytic event that compelled an aesthetic and imaginative rejection of traditional epistemologies, inciting the rebellions of the modernists. This took the form of a fixed cultural narrative that persisted for years. Samuel Hynes describes the narrative as a sense of the "gap in history that the war engendered," being "rendered … in images of radical emptiness … fragmentation and ruin, all expressing a fracture in time and space."[142] Hynes, however argues that the dominance of this narrative was a symptom of the strategies of exclusion that were employed to consolidate and authorize high modernism. Its realization was carried out by critics, as well as artists. Ultimately, he argues, the simplified narrative suppressed a more complicated process of shifting and overlapping codes of meaning associated with the war. This includes Paul Fussell's attempt to homogenize responses to the war along the civilian/soldier binary. Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* extended literary study to the "lesser" soldier-poets and memoirists of the war. Nonetheless, it upheld the homogenizing narrative that the war was a watershed moment – "the last [war] to be conceived as taking place within … a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future."[143] The war, in this narrative, is the moment of disjunction when modernity begins. Hynes and others have worked to undermine the ubiquity of this version of modern history. Nonetheless, the war continues to define ideas of modernity, although its precise role has become less certain. In *Rites of Spring*, Modris Eksteins

[142] Hynes, Samuel. *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, (New York: Collier Books, 1990), xiii.
[143] Fussell 21.

inverts the relationship between the war and modernity. He argues that, rather than the war shaping our ideas of modernity, in-process aesthetic and social transformations likewise altered the way that the war was perceived and experienced.[144] The increased flexibility with which the war is viewed by scholars has led Allyson Booth to utilize the war and modernism as something akin to mutually interpretive lenses for one another. Her approach, she says, is not about "the particulars of … exchanges [between civilian and soldier, war and modernism]." Rather, it is a question of "the patterns that emerge as appropriate to … worlds of both combatant and civilian modernism."[145]

The same logic underlies my decision to examine Tolkien's work in the light of the Great War. I do not assume or argue for the war's unimpeachable significance to the cultural production of modernism. Rather, I search for emergent patterns between the demands of modernity as enacted by the war, and the practice of writing the fantastic. In part because of the immense body of critical work theorizing the relationship between the war and modernism, the war is a promising point of contact at which to locate affinities between modernism and the work that would give rise to the fantasy genre. Note that this is distinct from treating these theories as certainties; rather they offer a field of possibilities. Booth describes how this grants access to new and variegated historical knowledge in the context of the high modernists:

> A canonical modernist text, like any other work of art, will reconfigure itself depending on the lens through which one peers, and there are any number of narratives that can be constructed from the numerous forms of representation that provide us with our only access to the past.[146]

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[144] Eksteins, Modris. *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2000).
[145] Booth, Allyson. *Postcards From the Trenches: Negotiating the Space Between Modernism and the First World War*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 5.
[146] Booth, 5.

By utilizing the First World War as a point of common theoretical departure, this project configures Tolkien in such a way as to place him in conversation with modernism, rather than opposition. By relocating Tolkien as a war writer, it asks how the nature of the experience of the war could have compelled the interpretive and representative strategies we have come to associate with Tolkien, in the same way they have been understood to have contributed to those of the high modernists. What we find, is that, as Wyatt Bonikowski argues, "there is something in the nature of the modern war experience, both physical and psychical, that resists representation: it overwhelms the senses, disturbs memory, and leaves traces in disruptive symptoms."[147] "And," we might add, "in storytelling."

Far from mere reactionary escapism, Tolkien's turn toward the fantastic is analogous to the high modernist turn toward formal experimentation. Both emerge in response to the challenges to mimetic representation brought about by twentieth-century modernity. This is no longer as unusual a claim as it might once have been, as recent scholarship has called into question the purely rational character of post-WWI England. Critics such as George M. Johnson have called attention to the burgeoning interest in magic and mysticism in England that coincided with the war and its aftermath. Johnson argues that previous studies have assumed that society has "progressed toward enlightenment, rendering the earlier era limited in its understanding." This distorts their understanding of the practice, by "back-projecting assumptions and values."[148] The process Johnson describes resembles the way that scholars retroactively applied

[147] Bonikowski, Wyatt. *Shellshock and the Modern Imagination: The Death Drive in Post-World War I British Fiction*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 3.
[148] Johnson, 3.

modernist norms to Tolkien and his imitators. Leigh Wilson has gone further, arguing that the prevalence of magic during this time was in fact a response to modernity, because its primitivism implicitly rejects modern rationalism that, in that moment, seemed so clearly to have resulted in disaster. Magical thinking was "attractive to artists trying to remake an idea of mimesis precisely because of their modern status."[149] If modernism is, by its very definition, engaged in a project of self-differentiation from the recent past, the irrationality of magic provides an ideal oppositional force to the progressive liberal humanism that stagnated before rationalizing its way into the war.

Although it codes itself differently, therefore, Tolkien's work reacts to the same epochal shifts as that of the high modernists. More than the civilian writers, however, the uniquely overwhelming experiences and distortions of the war compelled the soldier-writers toward the fantastic. In the coming chapters, therefore, I read Tolkien in conversation with the soldier-poets and war memoirists, rather than the high modernists. John Clute describes the war as "an experience so unhouseling that otherworlds – even if they were impossible – became regions of the mind easily inhabitable in the imagination of the mature writer."[150] The war, in other words, was sufficiently unthinkable to untether those who lived through it from the imaginative strictures of the "impossible." By placing Tolkien's work in the context of the war, we recognize that its apparent reactionary nature is in fact an urgent response to this contemporary crisis of belief. If a fantasy narrative is, as W. R. Irwin defines it, "a story based on and controlled by an over violation of what is generally accepted as a possibility," then its emergence in and from a

[149] Wilson, Leigh. *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy, and the Occult*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013. 4.
[150] Clute, 25.

world that seemed pathologically to upend old certainties appears inevitable.[151] Like Brian Attebery, I see modern fantasy not as "an anachronistic alternative to Modernism but as one of its important manifestations," albeit one that existed for decades as a mere undercurrent.[152] What we lack is the terms according to which fantasy's modern roots can be effectively understood and interpreted.

[151] Irwin, 4.
[152] Attebery, *Stories*, 42.

Chapter 2: The Fantastic Front

For British soldier-writers, the images and experiences of No Man's Land fitted into no readily available paradigm by which war could be understood. The young men who set off for the western front took with them models of war and images of Europe derived from chivalric romance. What they encountered on the other side of the English Channel was so wildly different that many interpreted it as a type of otherworld. It seemed to them that they had stepped out of the orderly, rational, modern world and into a twisted space that Paul Fussell has described as a manifestation of Northrop Frye's demonic world.[153] The front both undermined and overwrote contemporary understandings of warfare. More than this, it upended traditional relationships between nature, technology, science, magic, and religion on which positivist ideologies depended. The oppositional order that resulted was evident in the landscape. Its pits and mires were products of modern technology; mortar shells reshaped the land; thickets of razor-wire hedged it in. Rather than the uplifting effects of scientific advancement predicted by Enlightenment rationalism, the front presented the soldiers with what Horkheimer and Adorno call "a new kind of barbarism."[154] On the front, humanity was reduced to disposable materiel – a fungible resource, liable at any time to be annihilated by the technology of modern war. Soldiers seeking to communicate this unthinkable reality to the civilian population at home found themselves without an available discourse capable of rendering it comprehensible. The Great War presented a representational dilemma

[153] Fussell, 136-37.
[154] Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002) xiv.

because it was not only unprecedented, but quite literally unimaginable. It so violated the liberal humanist ideologies that dominated contemporary England, and which helped fuel the drive to war, that many authors found themselves drawing on the fantastic to convey the experience to their countrymen.[155]

The British war memoirs that appeared between 1928 and 1937 exhibit many characteristics of what Farah Mendlesohn calls the "Portal-Quest Fantasy." This subgenre concerns a protagonist who passes across a barrier – a wardrobe, a looking glass, or the borders of the Shire – and in doing so, enters the world of the fantastic. Portal fantasy protagonists "[go] from a modern life … into direct contact with the fantastic." They learn to function in and manipulate this new world by coming to understand its (apparently irrational) governing principles. The portal fantasy plot is thus concerned with "entry, transgression, and negotiation."[156] Soldiers crossing the channel and passing through western France to the front describe the journey in similar terms. This should not be surprising. According to Fusssell, for British soldiers brought up in the Edwardian school system, one of the best-known common texts was Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The text, he argues, made "front-line experience … available for interpretation when it was seen how closely parts of it resembled" Bunyan's narrative.[157] Mendlesohn likewise identifies it as a foundational text in the portal-quest fantasy. For Mendlesohn, it highlights that the real goal of such journeys "is moral growth … or redemption. The process … is shaped by a metaphorized and moral geography."[158] The landscape literalizes the narrative, embodying the transition undergone by the protagonist as it is

[155] Sherry, 32-47.
[156] Mendlesohn, xix-xx.
[157] Fussell, 136-7.
[158] Mendlesohn, 4.

traversed. By crossing the landscape, the pilgrim or the questing hero enacts a spiritual journey.

While the journey undertaken by British soldiers imitated the portal fantasy pattern, it also inverted the structure. Few, if any, memoirists report finding either redemption or moral growth on the front. On the contrary, most found the front remarkable in its stark amorality. If they had crossed into an otherworld, it was one that mocked the traditional standards of honor in warfare expressed in chivalric romance. This inversion was perceived by soldiers along several indices. For example, in his preface to *In Parenthesis* David Jones describes the contrast and its effects. He describes the change as a product of the technology with which war is waged. "We feel a rubicon has been passed," he says, "between striking with a hand weapon as men used to do and loosing poison from the sky as we do ourselves. We doubt the decency of our own inventions and are certainly in terror of the possibilities."[159] Jones maps moral degradation not only onto advances in technology, but across time and onto landscape. The use of "rubicon," although idiomatic, conveys the sense of passing across a boundary into a new space – one which is qualitatively irreconcilable with its counterpart on the other side. This is a key feature of the portal fantasy for Mendlesohn: "the fantastic is on *the other side* [of the portal, relative to the mundane] and does not leak."[160] This mutual isolation means that the otherworld is fantastic not only for the reader, but for the characters within the narrative who encounter it. For those who don't encounter it at all, the otherworld remains unknowable and incomprehensible. (Consider, for example, *The Wizard of Oz*, or any other well-known fantasy in which the protagonist, having returned from the

[159] Jones, David. *In Parenthesis*. (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), xiv.
[160] Mendlesohn, 1.

otherworld, is met with disbelief and condescension by their mundane community). Many veterans of the Great War returned home to a public whose ideas of the war were derived from state propaganda and who were unprepared to recognize the reality of the conflict.

Like the soldiers who shipped out, many civilian ideas of warfare were based on chivalric romance. Pro-war propaganda reinforced this with images of St. George and King Arthur, encouraging the public to view the war as a noble undertaking.[161] The population of England was ill-equipped to imagine the unprincipled and distinctly modern slaughter taking place in Europe. Ironically, this made the war more suited to being rendered in the fantastic, not less, by ensuring that it remained outside the bounds of knowability. In effect, the quarantine of information kept the portal closed for most British citizens during the war. This created a conundrum for veteran authors, many of whom saw themselves as having a responsibility to open the eyes of their readers by conveying to them the reality of the front. If, as I assert, the fantastic operates through, and grants access to, events beyond the limits of collectively-recognized possibility, it also renegotiates the boundaries of belief. This virtue meant that it was a viable means to communicate the experience of the war to an incredulous or uncomprehending public. Precisely by circumventing the question of possibility, the fantastic invites the credulity that Tolkien describes as secondary belief.[162] By inviting the reader to perceive the front as a space that is in some way unreal, the war writers made them more receptive to the

[161] Frantzen, Allen. *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice and the Great War.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 13-16.
[162] "On Fairy-Stories," 132.

transformative effect it worked on their image of war, as well as the ideological upheavals they implied.

If this claim seems curious at first glance, it is likely because the war memoirists, are generally viewed to have worked primarily in the mimetic mode. The notable exception is David Jones (whose *In Parenthesis* is, in any event, difficult to categorize). This has been understood in part as a desire to communicate the material conditions of the battlefield, and in part as a rejection of abstractions like honor and glory that serve to conceal suffering. But, as Kathryn Hume notes, the clean divide between the mimetic and fantastic modes is a false dichotomy; most works in fact contain elements of both.[163] To sustain this dichotomy, critics like Fussell find themselves having to explain away textual elements that register as fantastic, even by a stricter definition. For example, he identifies among the soldiers "a plethora of very un-modern superstitions, talismans, wonders, miracles, relics, legends, and rumors," which he considers anomalous in "the midst of a war representing a triumph of modern industrialism, materialism, and mechanism." He attributes the motivation for such superstitions to "inexpressible terror long and inexplicably endured," effectively casting the fantastic as an irrational symptom of traumatic experience, rather than examining the benefits it offered.[164] At the same time, the distinction he makes relies on frameworks that utilize binaries discussed in the previous chapter. Modernity is defined primarily by excluding the un-modern, which in this instance includes mostly elements that would be considered fantastic. Categorizing the fantastic as unmodern, and the technological as modern, creates the appearance of an opposition without substantively establishing their exclusivity. Instead, it asserts their

[163] Hume, xii.
[164] Fussell, 115.

mutual exclusivity according to what Randall Styers describes as "a mode of self-referential opposition" in which modernity is conceivable only as a negation of the primitive.[165] Presenting the war as if it is fundamentally unsuited to the fantastic thus effectively requires that the fantastic be written out on tautological assumptions much like those that formed around high modernism.

On the contrary, it was quite common for war memoirists to present the front as a space imbued with fantastic overtones by virtue of precisely the characteristics that Fussell identifies as modern. David Jones describes the practices and routines of trench warfare as a set of distortions that color the soldiers' impressions of the landscape:

> the day by day in the Waste Land, the sudden violences and long stillnesses, the sharp contours and unformed voids of that mysterious existence, profoundly affected the imaginations of those who suffered it. It was a place of enchantment. It is perhaps best described in Malory, book iv, chapter 15 – that landscape spoke 'with a grimly voice.'[166]

The enchantment Jones refers to describes a space and a set of phenomena whose existence cannot be comprehended or explained in strictly rational terms. This is represented both by the practice of modern war – "sudden violences and long stillnesses" – and the unearthly shape of No Man's Land's "sharp contours and unformed voids." These mark the front as a time and place given form by the technology of modern war. Trenches, bombs, gun emplacements, mortar shells, and barbed wire remake the landscape. The practical and logistical necessities that these technologies create regulate the ability of armies to move and operate within the environment they remake. Far from being an oppositional category to modern war, the fantastic as it manifests on the front is a product of modern war.

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[165] Styers, 4.
[166] Jones, x-xi.

The front enchants by transforming the imaginative capacities of those who experience it. The war's utter lack of precedent meant that soldiers encountered it without readily-available means of comprehension. If realism denotes those concepts which appear possible within the bounds of rational thought, then the fantastic's presumed oppositional stance toward reality renders it more suited to the task of constructing alternative epistemological frameworks than purely realistic representation. It allowed soldiers to imaginatively inhabit a world that exhibited no apparent rational order, but which operated under the seemingly-arbitrary logics and compulsions of modern war. By declining to engage the standard of verifiability, the fantastic avoids what Horkheimer and Adorno call "modern civilization's fear of departing from the facts."[167] The fantastic has the power to negate rationalism's monopoly on the possible. In the case of the First World War, this meant representing and addressing conditions that turned positivist Enlightenment doctrine on its head. Fussell's use of "inexpressible" and "inexplicable," above, suggests the scale of the challenge; soldier writers were obliged to find a means to signify a place that was ideologically and epistemologically impossible.

I conceptualize this challenge as a search for a viable mythology. I use the term here in the sense articulated by Roland Barthes: a second-order signifying system that dictates cultural values to such an extent that it provides a model for reality.[168] By this model, much writing of the Great War can be understood as a realization that available mythic systems of signification had become defunct. On the front, cultural myths of war, nature, and technology ceased to instructively correspond to experience. The soldiers

[167] Horkheimer and Adorno, xvi.
[168] Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 223-24.

who were obligated to inhabit this uniquely nihilistic space – and particularly those who sought to convey it to others – found it necessary to reconfigure available systems to enable new meanings. The preponderance of new myths and rituals on the front that Fussell identifies as curious and unmodern is thus a response to this vacuum of meaning. Brian Attebery has argued that the reconfiguring of mythic systems is one of the primary functions of the fantastic.[169] I argue that this is also a feature of the fantastic's capacity to model ideas that contradict reality without inducing incredulity. Secondary belief offers potential alternatives to consensus cultural certainties without offending modern insistence on empiricism. If, as Margaret Hiley contends, "the main function of myth is to help mankind come to terms with reality," the fantastic is uniquely suited to renegotiating the limits of belief.[170]

This perceived lack of meaning-making cultural systems is not, of course, unique to the war writers. A sense of bottomlessness, a lack of grounding experienced as constantly-receding meaning, is commonly identified in twentieth-century writing. Michael Bell goes so far as to argue that modern myth encapsulates the "central problem of modernity: how to live, given what we know."[171] Moreover, the widely-observed cultural sense of a break with the past is symptomatic of this same lack of meaning. The ability of myth to simulate an inherent relationship between signifier and signified "transforms historical reality into a natural, self-justifying image of [the cultural certainties it conveys]."[172] Delegitimizing predominant mythic systems thus eliminates

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[169] *Stories*, 3.
[170] Hiley, Margaret. "Stolen Language, Cosmic Models: Myth and Mythology in Tolkien. *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 841.
[171] Bell, Michael. "Introduction," in *Myth and the Making of Modernity*. ed. Michael Bell and Peter Poellner. (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), 2.
[172] Hiley, 841.

the apparent instructive qualities of the past as a guide for present action. But the front presented this dilemma in a particularly concrete and urgent manner. The sense that so many soldiers experienced of having stepped into another world is the effect of certainties falling out from under them. It is the ability to operate without certainty that lends the fantastic its power in this environment.

Technological Landscapes and the Representational Challenge of the Front

To many writers of the Great War, the set of experiences which constituted the front seemed to actively resist being rendered into language. The difficulty lay partly in the representation and communication of a set of events that were experienced as fundamentally incoherent. When describing the war to readers who had spent it on the home front, the challenge was exacerbated by the utter lack of an applicable frame of reference. Edmund Blunden describes the impossibility of representing the war as a problem of selection – an inability to choose those "sights, faces, words, incidents which characterized the time."[173] But Ford Madox Ford suggests that the problem is a lack of available language appropriate to the assault that mechanized warfare inflicts on the senses. He describes the moment that memory meets language:

> extraordinarily coloured and exact pictures behind my eyeballs – little pictures having all the brilliant minuteness that medieval illuminations had – of towers, and roofs, and belts of trees and sunlight; or, for the matter of these, of men, burst into mere showers of blood and dissolving into muddy ooze; of aeroplanes and shells against the translucent blue. But as for putting them – into words! No: the mind stops dead, and something in the brain stops and shuts down.[174]

[173] Blunden, Edmund. *Undertones of War*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 141.
[174] Ford, Ford Madox. "Arms and the Mind," *Esquire*, 94 (Dec 1980), 79.

The experiences Ford describes are neither irretrievable nor indistinct. On the contrary, they are vivid and immanent. Nor does their horror compel silence. Rather, they appear to resist language as a medium. The "mind stops dead" at the prospect of rendering the experiences into language. Curiously, however, Ford has clearly just done so. He does not, therefore, mean that literal description is impossible. Rather, language fails to extend beyond literal description, into the enormity and terror that accompany the images. The words required to render the front faithfully and completely are not available. Samuel Hynes argues that although the war "might be *described* … [it] could not be *imagined*. For to imagine it would be to discover its significance." This is in part a consequence of the war's immensity but also its refusal to resolve into narrative, "because it would give [the war] a significance it did not possess."[175] The lack of a viable interpretive framework meant that the entirety of the war experience was not directly communicable.

For many war writers, the landscape of No Man's Land provided a means to communicate the war indirectly by embodying its otherworldly character. As Paul Fussell has observed, No Man's Land in war writing is cast as the antithesis to Edwardian England's pastoral ideal.[176] The blasted surface and stagnant mires of the front evinced the grotesque transformation that rural western Europe had undergone. In contrast to the natural systems that shaped rural spaces, the front and its ordering were products of technology. The front was hostile to life, destructive and degenerative. And yet, when soldiers sought to represent the phenomena that occurred there – the launches of mortars, explosions of shells, and the impact craters they left behind – they turned most often to natural imagery. Chivalric models are warfare were ill-equipped to account for field guns,

[175] Hynes, 106. Italics in original.
[176] Fussell, 235.

tanks, or mustard gas. Even the scale on which these technologies affected the environment confounded attempts to contain them in language. This turn to natural imagery is a tactic to represent the magnitude and consequences of the technological processes that operated on the front. Volcanoes, meteors, and above all the constant thunder of the guns provide the images that writers use to make the experience of No Man's Land comprehensible, for themselves as well as their readers.

One consequence of these strategies was to discursively weaken the distinctions that structured ideals of modernity. In *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*, Randall Styers argues that the distinctions between religion, magic, and science are fundamental to the western subject's ability to see itself as modern. When the Enlightenment established rationality as the essentially modern mode of evaluating the world, religion's role in giving structure to human life receded to the spiritual dimension alone. This new, secular society nonetheless required a category to differentiate religion from its less rational cousin. Magic was "configured as the illegitimate (and effeminized) sibling," defining religion "through contrast with this form of deviance."[177] Thus, magic is modern western society has provided the imaginative barrier that separates science and reason from religion. In doing so, it has helped to structure western ideology, playing a "crucial role … in producing a sense of the secular, a nonreligious world under the "rational" control of politics, science, [and] capitalism."[178] As we will see, the experience of the front, and the necessities of representing its unprecedented nature, undermined magic's integrity as a barrier. Moreover, because dominant contemporary discourses understood magic as "a definitive characteristic of the

[177] Styers, 6.
[178] Styers, 11.

"primitive" mentality," weakening the distinction threatened to collapse the perceived difference between the past and present.[179] Despite the radically modern associations with which we have tended to hold the war, therefore, No Man's Land also manifested as a turn toward the past.

The monstrous novelty of No Man's Land demanded recourse to readily available frameworks to produce it comprehensibly for a modern readership. But by deploying these frameworks in this radically new context, the writers necessarily redefined them. For example, as Fussell has noted, the act of shipping out "[could not] help seeming to [the soldier] like those of the hero of medieval romance."[180] These stories (or at least their Victorian revisions) were among the most prevalent common texts of British soldiers. Thus, they provided a potential narrative framework by which to order the soldier's journey. The similarities between the typical chivalric romance quest and the prospect of leaving for the front are straightforward: a male warrior ventures into the European landscape, faces challenges there, and returns home. However, the landscape encountered by the Royal Welch Fusiliers was nothing like the countryside through which – for example – Sir Gawain rode. No Man's Land was the grotesque, fetid state of Europe under the auspices of modern industrialized warfare. It posed a material threat, in contrast to the spiritual threat faced by the quest hero. The romance quest continued to shape the soldiers' expectations and thus helped to frame their experiences. But their content – the pastoral landscapes and spiritual triumphs – had ceased to resemble reality, now appearing naïve, even quaint. The predominant mythic system available lost its ability to instructively order the world. Consequently, soldiers sought a means to make their myths

[179] Styers, 14.
[180] Fussell, 135.

signify again or, failing that, a mythic system capable of providing meaning to this new world. Hence, Fussell's "un-modern superstitions" represent efforts to impose order on an irrational space.

The effect of this mythic reorganization is particularly visible in portrayals of the landscape. The environment came to emblematize the totality of the amoral, technological systems that structured the front, and determined the soldiers' place in it. Through the landscape, the war writers recorded the event of a changing relationship to nature. The front did not assume the primacy of natural forces over technological; technology determined the character of the environment on equal terms with nature, and in fact superseded it. Ironically, this could be taken to signify the triumph of Enlightenment rationalism. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the purpose of the Enlightenment was the subjugation of nature to humanity, promising freedom from natural cycles of life and death at whose mercy we had existed.[181] But the technological processes acting on the front were similarly indifferent to human life. Mustard gas and mortar shells dispatched with human material as efficiently and dispassionately as disease and natural disaster. But where nature was understood to be random and amoral, these were products of human ingenuity and rationally-driven advancements. No Man's Land epitomizes Horkheimer and Adorno's argument that the overthrow of nature – the fulfillment of Enlightenment doctrine – leads back to an amoral world:

> the subjugation of everything natural to the sovereign subject culminates in the domination of what is blindly objective and natural. This tendency levels all antithesis of bourgeois thought, especially that between moral rigor and absolute amorality.[182]

[181] Horkheimer and Adorno, 24.
[182] Horkheimer and Adorno, xviii.

The technological supremacy of the front rendered soldiers fungible – reduced to materiel, indistinct from the weapons they carried. They were another interchangeable component in the machinery of war, operating in a landscape that both recorded and enacted this condition. Edmund Blunden describes "old uniforms, and a great many bones" intermingled with the mud in the trenches, remarking that the skeletons seem "less coherent than most," as if they had taken on the chaotic character of the front.[183] This is similar to Ford's description of men "dissolving into muddy ooze," above. Styers argues that a fundamental feature of premodern "magical worldview," was that "the boundaries between the self and the natural world were seen as essentially permeable." This changed when the Enlightenment promised freedom from this vulnerability, and isolated religion to an inward, spiritual practice.[184] No Man's Land, we might say, ironically revived an essentially premodern way of knowing the world.

The front disrupted the ideological organization of nature, technology, and humanity that undergirded the imperial project and thus facilitated the drive to war. In this sense, it epitomized the bad faith with which Enlightenment principles were placed in service of the war. On the home front, the public case for war was made via rationalist discourse that served to conceal the humanist contradictions inherent in sending hundreds of thousands to die in the service of imperial political interests. Rational argumentation was deployed not in the service of truth, but as a means "to make sensible a policy previously deemed irrational." Sherry describes the government's strategy as the deployment of "partisan thinkers … to rationalize the government's cause." Charles Hayward, for example, conceded "that 'war' and 'rational politics' denominate an

[183] Blunden, 13.
[184] Styers, 12.

impossibility," before undertaking "a fierce attempt to reason out the rightness of the English cause."[185] The pliability of reason exhibited to the political demands of empire should come as little surprise. If imperialism is "reason in its most terrible form," then safeguarding the empire advances the ostensibly humanist goals of positivism.[186] The front thus has the capacity to signify not only the immediate technological and natural implications, but a broad breakdown in the epistemological underpinnings of western imperial ideology.

While natural imagery made modern warfare describable, it did little to make it truly comprehensible. Discrete events could be communicated, but the significance they took on as a totality upended the soldier's understanding of reality. Positivism assumes an arrangement of man, nature, and machine in which technological (and thus civilizational) growth progressively frees humanity from the tyranny of the natural world. An encounter with technology operating on the scale of natural phenomena upended the relationship between nature and technology that was needed to sustain positivist assumptions. Using nature to represent these technologies only served to make this breakdown apparent. Human tools now affected the environment on a scale previously reserved for natural forces. But they produced a grotesque, demonic version. Where natural processes might produce rivers and forests, technological processes produce craters and sludge. Technology replaces nature as the careless, violent manifestation of human caprice and folly, rather than a benevolent force opposing natural chaos. Representing the conditions of the front did nothing to resolve this contradiction; Enlightenment positivism and the soldiers' experiences were fundamentally irreconcilable.

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[185] Sherry, 10-11.
[186] Horkheimer and Adorno, 70.

The fantastic in these texts results from authorial strategies that interrelate these irreconcilable knowledges. In doing so, they endow these experiences with associations and placed them in contexts that seemed impossible before. Edmund Blunden argues that the context of war robs authors of meaningful points of reference:

> I have not noticed any compelling similarity between a bomb used as an inkpot and a bomb in the hand of a corpse, or even between the look of a footballer after a goal all the way and that of a sergeant inspecting a whale-oiled fleet.[187]

Despite the superficial similarities between the objects and events he describes, modern war has robbed them of the coherence necessary to draw meaning from them. To lend these phenomena the semblance of coherence, writers described them in terms of available referents. But by connecting the mundane to the unknowable, they imbued both with strangeness, by virtue of the dissonance between them. This is illustrative of Brian Attebery's argument that much of modern fantasy gains its generative potency by "yoking two incompatible systems of belief."[188] In Tolkien's terms, some facet of the mundane is removed outside of primary belief, sacrificing a degree of its knowability and becoming a part of the fantastic. If the front represents a negative telos of the Enlightenment process of disenchantment through all-encompassing knowledge, the fantastic responds with the possibility of re-enchantment.

In written accounts of the Great War, the fantastic and its associated motifs frequently represent the young soldier's naiveté, regarded with disdain by his later counterpart. This reflects the post-Enlightenment belief, identified by both Tolkien and

[187] Blunden, 141.
[188] *Stories About Stories*, 25-26.

Clute, that fantastic stories were fundamentally suited for children. At George Sherston's arrival on the front, for example, Siegfried Sassoon writes:

> I had become quite fond of [the country], and the end-of-the-world along the horizon had some obscure hold over my mind which drew my eyes to it almost eagerly, for I could still think of trench warfare as an adventure. The horizon was quiet just not, as if the dragons that lived there were dozing.[189]

The fantastic, filtered through the lens of chivalric romance, signifies both the young Sherston's imagined version of war, and the older Sherston's disapproval thereof. The vanishing point of the continental horizon promises new, heroic experiences, embodied in the ideal of dragons – implicitly identifying Sherston with a questing knight. The literal corollary for the dragons, however, is the German guns that wait on the far side of the trenches. The pairing of these dissonant referents emphasizes the gap between Sherston's expectations, derived from chivalric romance, and the reality he will ultimately encounter. Ironically then, this imaginative framework actually upheld the positivist assertions that the front itself called into question, by consigning the fantastic to the past. And yet, it represents the comfort of an instructive mythic system; it is the guns that are unimaginable.

The fantastic mode enabled the war writers to represent the incomprehensibility of the front as an otherworldly space, dominated by the distinctly modern forces of mechanized warfare. And yet, by doing so, it laid bare the contradictions inherent in representing modern war according to Enlightenment-derived frameworks that its very nature undermined. The distinctly modern meets its negation in these texts; Sherston's guns never quite stop being dragons. The war dramatically recontextualized the

[189] Sassoon, Siegfried. *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*. (New York: Penguin, 2013), 15.

imaginative space of western Europe: who, since 1916, hears "the Somme" and pictures a river? Writers utilized the fantastic as a tool for navigating this new space by concretizing imaginative transformation as an entry into the otherworld. By allowing them to operate (however tentatively or conditionally) outside of the certitudes imposed by positivist ideologies, the fantastic offered the possibility of reconfiguring and reclaiming mythic systems in the context of modern war. Faced with the impossibility of constructing actionable meaning from the Great War, authors were obliged to erect meaning-making structures around it.

The three authors I examine in the remainder of this chapter represent three distinct strategies undertaken to reconcile the representative contradictions engendered by the front. Each utilizes the fantastic as an oppositional category to modernity via an otherworld. Effectively, these authors are attempting to resuscitate, discover, or create a mythic system that is capable of meaning-making within the conditions of industrialized warfare. Their efforts reflect a desire to connect with an imaginative world in order to derive instructive meaning from a mythic past whose relevance is no longer apparent. Their varying degrees of success met by each suggests the challenges inherent in representing the war, and highlights what many experienced as the ultimate irreconcilability of past with present in the face of the war. Edmund Blunden portrays the otherworld as a trip through time, inflecting and emphasizing its difference through the transformative effect the war visited on the French countryside, ultimately finding the dissonance too much to overcome. David Jones locates community between the English soldiers and warriors of mythic history, before withdrawing into the past in the face of battlefield slaughter. J. R. R. Tolkien literalizes the otherworld by treating modern war as

a lens through which to render a mythic past capable of anticipating No Man's Land. The greater the degree to which these authors invest their writing with the fantastic, the more they are able to resolve the contradictions they found to be inherent to the front.

Undertones of War and the Transformation of Europe

Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* creates the front as an otherworld by literalizing the contradictions it embodies. For Blunden, the crossing to the continent is a trip through time. The front inhabits a new epoch – one that overturns the positivist frameworks that shaped prior eras. This is a relatively common sentiment among contemporary authors: recall Wyndam Lewis's "B.C. and A.D."[190] But Blunden is notable because he concretizes this sensation in his portrayal of the Great War itself. Blunden's otherworld manifests primarily through the European landscape and the transformation it underwent during the war. *Undertones of War* portrays the nearly two years Blunden spent on the front between 1916 and 1917. The action of the text is perhaps nothing so much as transit. Blunden and his company traverse across and along the front lines, as well as back and forth between forward and rear. As they do, his portrayal gives the impression of traveling back and forth through time. Throughout the text, his intense awareness of the transformed state of the continent foregrounds the effects of industrialized warfare, emphasizing its distinctly modern nature as fantastic – even unreal. Visiting medieval towns that once would have evoked chivalric romance, Blunden finds them deserted and damaged by shelling. His awareness of the landscape's

[190] Lewis, 1.

formerly pastoral nature lends an alien quality to its current state. *Undertones of War* inhabits this contradiction, rather than attempting to resolve it. The text engenders a sense of what these spaces were, in tension with what they have become. For Blunden, this tension gives rise to the fantastic.

The fantastic acts generatively by recontextualizing both the war and the mythic referents in terms of one another. It is hardly novel at this point to observe the presence of romance and mythic allusion in First World War writing. While early studies tended to insist that the war was defined by "movement … from a mythologized to a demythologized world," recent scholarship has more and more frequently called this into question.[191] Several recent studies have argued that mythic and chivalric motifs inspired and consoled readers during and after the war, both on the front and at home.[192] But these studies have tended to treat such material as sterile, stable points of reference that soldiers turned to for support or guidance before putting them down again. Elizabeth Vandiver provides a representative example:

> traditional modes of expression … were brought into service to express the otherwise inexpressible … Faced with a kind of war for which recent history had in no way prepared them, British poets … drew on traditional modes of expression … to try and define the cataclysm they faced.[193]

Vandiver's revision is a matter of categorization. She concedes that some of the war writers adhere to the old paradigm, rejecting "traditional modes of expression," but argues that an overlooked group repurposed them for the modern war. But Blunden

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[191] Bergonzi, Bernard. *Heroes' Twilight*. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), 190.
[192] Among others, these include Allen J. Frantzen's *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Jonathan Vance's *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997); and Elizabeth Vandiver's *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010). Each positions itself as an explicit revision of existing narratives that present Great War writing as an entirely demythologized genre.
[193] Vandiver, 9.

makes clear that this practice goes beyond straightforward allusion. By deploying these elements to address the "otherwise inexpressible," Blunden and the other war writers destabilize their mythic signification. In the context of a war that departed so radically from any available frame of reference, these motifs came to signify the comfort of a knowable tradition. In short, for Blunden, they become mundane.

Ironically, the fantastic in *Undertones of War* is represented by the modern and technological; the pastoral trappings of chivalric romance inhabit the role of the mundane, precisely because they represent an explicability and comprehensibility that are absent from No Man's Land. Visiting Festubert Village in the summer of 1917, Blunden's attention is arrested and his impression colored by the changes worked on it by modern warfare. "In ancient days," he tells us, "perhaps in 1914, the village had been bombarded with serious intention by guns of horrid weight, and one gazed wonderingly into several enormous holes."[194] Blunden's description does not present the effects of industrialized war as the predictable, mundane outcome of rational phenomena. Rather, he "[gazes] wonderingly" into the resultant craters, emphasizing their incomprehensibility. The redefined space does not operate according to known (or indeed, knowable) principles; this is what marks it as an otherworld. The resulting impression imagine the guns not as battlefield materiel, but as monstrous creatures invested with awareness, even intent. The guns "of horrid weight" are the agents in his account of the bombardment. The imaginative crossing from one state to another gives rise to the central irony of the passage: Blunden's reference to 1914 as "ancient days." This gestures toward the common idea that the war had catalyzed or realized some

[194] Blunden, 17.

fundamental and qualitative change in humanity and its relationship to the world.[195] For Blunden, the dissonance between the medieval village and its modern, blasted condition evokes and concretizes this change through its material transformation. The front is not simply a landscape. Its transformation is ontological as much as physical. The resistance of its governing principles to interpretation renders it alien in unaccountable ways. This is the mechanism that robs the soldiers' mythic systems of their capacity to instruct, and even to signify meaning.

As Blunden's company moves toward the front, this alienating quality slowly becomes the defining characteristic of the landscape. By the time they reach No Man's Land, it dominates his impressions. This primacy is signified by the increasing presence of technological blight in Blunden's descriptions of the space. Technology's transformative effect on the landscape manifests as an omnipresent, almost spiritual threat. A passage relating his approach to the front reads like a mythic journey into hell, each feature of the scene ominously threatening:

> We passed the last melancholy estaminet on the eastward track, with shell-holes round the door, and we tried (at the suggestion of my batman) its coloured syrups … Here telegraph wires no longer ran aloft in the air, but lay festooned thickly along the torn-up railway bank, their poles and teeth-like rows of insulators leaning this way and that, the several rails here and there curled up like hurt reptiles into the air … other ruins of industrial machinery hovered through the throbbing haze; the path became corrupt, the canal dead and stagnant … Here silence, heat, and blind terror shared the dominion.[196]

This passage epitomizes the front-as-otherworld. Although it is the product of mundane technological activity, the landscape appears aware and hostile. Telegraph poles

[195] Expressed perhaps most famously by Virginia Woolf in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" when she declared 'on or about December 1910, human character changed.'
[196] Blunden, 25.

transform into teeth, rail lines into wounded reptiles, and the "throbbing haze" takes on an aspect of active presence. The ephemerality of objects intensifies the threat they seem to pose by heightening the unearthly sense of mystery that permeates the space. This world is at once indistinct and horrifically present. The few concrete references – shell holes, telegraphs, "industrial machinery" – ground it in the modern period. Were these absent, the passage would not be out of place in a chivalric romance or *The Pilgrim's Progress*. But the otherworldly nature of the space is created entirely by modern technological processes. From the objects, to their ruined state, to the haze itself, everything about the environment is the product of industrialized warfare.

This binarism, which locates an alternative world on the other side of the war's imaginative boundary, is not limited to the landscape, however. Rather, the landscape signifies, or else is a manifestation of, an alternative ordering of the world. Blunden's growing fluency in the rules that govern these new paradigms enacts Mendlesohn's principle that the portal fantasy sees the protagonist learning to navigate and negotiate with the fantastic world.[197] As in the case of the landscape, it is frequently the antiquated or overtly fantastic element that represents the mundane world, as an oppositional category to the inconceivably modern. The following account of a patrol's report on a sniper's nest illustrates how Blunden deploys these oppositional frameworks:

> … Kapp's patrol had been remarkable, and he sent back a long precise report, full of suggestive information. The Olympian comment was, 'too flowery for a military report.' Our chieftain could not encourage anything that bore the semblance of a mental method off a world before the war.[198]

[197] Mendlesohn, xix.
[198] Blunden, 16.

Once more, the imaginative epochal shift ("a world before the war") doubles as a boundary across which the mundane cannot move. The commanding officer dismisses the report as "too flowery," on the grounds that it reflects a pre-war "mental method." His critique implies a rationalist insistence on the verifiable and concrete, reducing all things to quantifiable materiel. But the text itself endorses the report, describing it is "precise," and "full of suggestive information." Moreover, it depicts the relationship between the commander and his troops with fantastic and antiquated terminology when it refers to him as "Olympian," and "chieftain." Although the text portrays the authority of the post-war "mental method," the narrator's ability to critique it in these terms undermines its totality. Blunden's capacity to manipulate this alternative order reflects his growing ability to navigate the otherworld's epistemological systems.

Because the otherworldly order manifests visibly in the landscape, and because it is signified through the opposition of antiquated and modern contextual elements, Blunden experiences his return trip as a passage through time. His journey back reflects his journey out, but the destabilizing effects of the otherworldly order has spread to the formerly pastoral landscapes of western Europe. As he travels by train on his return trip to England, Blunden's reflections emphasize the epistemological difference of the otherworld, rather than its physical effects:

> We travel … over battlefields already become historic, bewildering solitudes over which the weeds are waving in the wild moon, houseless regions where still there are lengths of trenches twisting in and out, woods like ship-masts where amateur soldiers, so many of them, accepted death in lieu of war-time wages; at last we come to the old villages from which the battle of 1916 was begun, still rising in mutilation and liberation.[199]

[199] Blunden, 190.

That the battlefields have "already become historic" highlights the transformative effect the war has had not merely on the physical features of the surrounding landscape, but on Blunden's means of perceiving and imaginatively interacting with it. Western Europe has become indescribable without the context of its recent history. The "bewildering solitudes" recall the battles that emptied and historicized them. The trenches emblematize the material effect of modern warfare on pastoral spaces. The forests evoke the aimless deaths suffered there. Although Blunden is returning from the front to the mundane world, his is not freed from the distorting epistemological effects of the front. Traditional mythic systems fail to regain their instructive capacity; he cannot interpret the world except in light of its transformed state.

This disruption destabilizes the pastoral ideal that Paul Fussell posits as central to the epistemological structures of the war memoirs. For Fussell, the pastoral constitutes "a way of invoking a code to hint by antithesis at the indescribable." Moreover, it insulates those who invoke it from the horrors of the war.[200] But the comforting effects of the pastoral are derived from one's assurance of its stability and reliability as a point of reference. It functions in accordance with mythic systems of belief, and its symbolic efficacy relies on their integrity. By robbing these systems of their capacity to signify, the front undermines Blunden's ability to extract comfort or even meaning from his journey back. The pastoral to which he returns is itself inflected by the knowledge that he cannot reconcile its mythic significance with the mutual, contradictory presence of the front-as-otherworld.

[200] Fussell, 235.

Undertones at War concludes with an explicit identification of the epistemological aporia to which Blunden's passage through the otherworld has led. During a layover on his trip west, Blunden considers the relatively unspoiled pastoral landscape of Buire-sur-Ancre. He walks among "willows and waters … so silvery and unsubstantial that one could spend a lifetime to paint [them]."[201] Positioning this space in opposition to the front, he deploys fantastic motifs to emphasize the irreconcilability of the two: "Could any countryside be more sweetly at rest, more alluring to naiad and hamadryad, more incapable of dreaming of the field gun?"[202] Despite their mythic origins, the "naiad and hamadryad," ironically represent the knowable and thus the mundane against the incomprehensibility of the war. But they originate in mythic systems that cannot coherently represent a world that includes the front. Hence, the land itself is "incapable of dreaming of the field gun" because the systems that enable Blunden to render meaning from it do not extend to the technological environment to the east. This epistemological incompatibility reaffirms the front's status as an otherworld. What has changed is Blunden's capacity to view the mundane without reference to its opposite; he has rebuilt his mental and representational frameworks to account for the alien nature of the front. Like the heroes of Mendlesohn's portal fantasies, Blunden has learned to operate according to the rules of the otherworld, and to manipulate them to his advantage. But doing so has hindered his ability to easily return to the mundane world.

Blunden's representational strategy utilizes the fantastic mode to emphasize the unreality of the front, and to imaginatively separate it from the epistemological systems of the mundane world on the other side of the channel. In doing so, however, it reifies the

[201] Blunden, 191.
[202] Blunden, 191.

irreconcilability of the two. Although he returns from the front, he Blunden is unable to revert to past methods organizing his experience. He cannot communicate the war across the boundary established by the otherworld, even to himself. Unable to make the mythic systems of the past render meaning in the present, he settles instead for documenting an irresolvable opposition. The fantastic in *Undertones of War* cannot make modern war comprehensible, only emphasize those things that place it outside of existing frameworks of comprehensibility. It does not allow Blunden to place the present in the context of the past.

In Parenthesis: Talking to the Past

In contrast to *Undertones of War*, David Jones's *In Parenthesis* utilizes the fantastic in order to seek present-day reconciliation between modernity and antiquity in the context of the front. *In Parenthesis* seeks to re-establish the mythic past as a meaning-making system in the present. The text is a pastiche of Jones's own wartime experience, Arthurian romance, and the Welsh *Y Gododdin*, amalgamated into a single narrative. The result is a picture of the war that Kathleen Staudt describes "an odd mixture of the unprecedented and familiar."[203] This description echoes Brian Attebery, who defines modern fantasy as "a form that makes use of both the fantastic mode, to produce the impossibilities, and the mimetic, to reproduce the familiar."[204] If *In Parenthesis* does not reproduce the literal barrier between the mundane and the otherworld, as *Undertones of War* does, it nonetheless manipulates the contravening associations that define the

[203] Staudt, 67.
[204] *Strategies of Fantasy*, 16-17.

boundary. The fantastical interaction of the two signifying systems reopens the meanings of Vandiver's "traditional modes of expression" under the conditions of modern war, testing their meaning-making capacities in a world whose cultural narratives disintegrated on the Somme. War provides a mutual signifying context, as a point of both connection and discord with the past. Although the Great War is "unprecedented in its power," *In Parenthesis* argues that "the men engaged in battle are much the same as they have always been."[205] If Blunden utilizes the fantastic to interrogate difference in signification across the home/front boundary, Jones attempts to resolve these differences within the context of the war.

The otherworld of *In Parenthesis* differs from that found in *Undertones of War* because it is not spatially bounded. Rather, it is palimpsetically overlaid onto the front itself. The means by which John Ball and his compatriots traverse the boundary are linguistic and interpretive. Jones creates the differences within his war narrative in part by intercutting between chivalric prose and modernist formal experimentation. *In Parenthesis* thus constitutes a missing link of sorts between the realist war memoirs, modern fantasy, and the high modernist movement. This liminal quality caused Jones to long inhabit what Elizabeth Ward has described as an outsider status relative to the twentieth-century canon, and Thomas Dilworth to lament that "few poets who have been so highly praised have been so long neglected by the academic establishment."[206,207] Like Tolkien, Jones has been accused of what Paul Robichaud calls "romantic nostalgia and

[205] Staudt, 67.
[206] Ward, Elizabeth. *David Jones: Mythmaker*. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1983), 2-3.
[207] Dilworth, Thomas. *The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 4.

reactionary ideology" for his writing's medievalist elements.[208] As noted above, such critiques stem from a binary logic that defines modernity primarily through its opposition to antiquity.

Studies of *In Parenthesis* have been obliged to disregard one or another of its signifying practices to justify its inclusion or exclusion from literary categories, in the interest of maintaining stable canonical boundaries. Famously, Paul Fussell's discussion in *The Great War and Modern Memory* treats the mythic elements of *In Parenthesis* as a sort of curiosity that needs to be explained away. Fussell characterizes the war as "a triumph of modern industrialism, materialism, and mechanism," leaving little or no space for the soldiers of Welsh and Arthurian myth to signify in the context of the front.[209] As a result, while he acknowledges the presence of mythic elements in Jones's poem, Fussell overlooks or outright denies their capacity to generate meaning. His argument fails to account for the fantastic. By applying a binary understanding of modernity, Fussell's study itself forecloses on the meaning of the text. This is visible his attempt to negotiate Jones's authorial status. In the interest of maintaining modern literary boundaries, Fussell strips the mythic elements from the text:

> Jones has attempted in *In Parenthesis* to elevate the matter of Flanders and Picardy to the status of the old Matter of Britain. That it refuses to be elevated, that it resists being subsumed into heroic myth, is less Jones's fault than the war's. The war will not be understood in traditional terms: the machine gun alone makes it so special and unexpected that it simply can't be talked about as is it were one of the conventional wars of history. Or worse, literary history. What keeps the poem from total success is Jones's excessively formal and doctrinal way of fleeing from the literal.[210]

[208] Robichaud, Paul. *Making the Past Present: David Jones, the Middle Ages, & Modernism*. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 3.
[209] Fussell, 115.
[210] Fussell, 153.

At the core of this passage is an attempt to establish and sustain Jones's authorial status; the poem's failures are "less Jones's fault than the war's." However, to do so credibly, he must also uphold the foundational principles of contemporary literary criticism, which proclaim the text's fundamental unsuitability to its subject matter. Fussell's core assertion is that the appropriate mode of writing about the war is the ironic – realistic, and deeply pessimistic. It "will not be understood in traditional terms," he insists. Fussell's use of "tradition" here is distinct from Eliot's. Rather than a self-identified and defining literary lineage, Fussell is using the term in the same way as Elizabeth Vandiver – to describe antiquated styles and tropes. To treat *In Parenthesis* as a modern text, therefore, Fussell effectively disregards a considerable portion of its content.

The premise that Jones's use of chivalric material constitutes an attempt to "elevate" the war to "the old Matter of Britain," rests on the assumption of a one-way exchange of meaning. In this model, "heroic myth" acts inductively, elevating the Great War by subsuming the war into itself. But because *In Parenthesis* comingles the two registers, the interplay that Attebery identifies as central to modern fantasy causes them to recontextualize one another. Jonathan Miles, for example, argues that "rather than ennobling war, [*In Parenthesis*] re-carnalizes the chivalric tradition."[211] Such a reading recognizes the ways that modern war reflexively transforms war as an imagined phenomenon. Because Fussell's critical model presupposes an appropriate mode for war-writing, he is naturally led to conclude that the fantastic dimensions of the poem constitute "flight from the literal." As we have seen, however, literal representation could not convey the entirety of the war-writers' experiences. Moreover, Fussell's phrase

[211] Miles, Jonathan. *Backgrounds to David Jones: A Study in Sources and Drafts*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990), 87.

echoes Tolkien's own "Flight of the Deserter." "On Fairy-Stories" contends that this model misinterprets the type of escape that fantasy affords – willfully, it is implied. Tolkien argues that the critique emerges from a desire for "acquiescence," rather than realism: that the modern subject submit to the primary of modernity, embrace its rationalist logics, and relinquish efforts to imagine alternatives. By way of contrast, he offers the "Escape of the Prisoner," a practice which imagines alternatives in direct response to unbearable circumstances .[212] John Ball's wartime experience, as portrayed in *In Parenthesis*, represents this variety of escape. The fantastic offers the opportunity to parse and endure modernity by means of antiquity, and in doing so, to revise modernity in kind.

The otherworld of *In Parenthesis* is defined less by place than by the distorting effects the war inflicts on Ball's experience of it. The boundary between the mundane and the fantastic is crossed at points when the war provides common context on which the text's mutually-interpreting modes can act. The dominant impression conveyed is thus the sense of occupying an interstice between the past and the present, as the text transitions freely back and forth between these two inflections. Jones attributes the poem's title to this phenomenon. He writes, he says, "in a kind of space between – I don't know between quite what … [and] for us amateur soldiers … the war itself was a parenthesis – how glad we were to step outside its brackets at the end of '18."[213] The impression of being untethered from what comes before and after is itself a characteristic of the war's distorting effect. As Ball stands watch on the first night of the Somme, Jones describes "the ebb time … like no-man's-land between yesterday and tomorrow and

[212] "On Fairy-Stories," 148.
[213] Jones, xv.

material things are but barely integrated and loosely tacked together."[214] With the sensation of temporal untethering comes the disintegration of the representational capacities of concrete signifying systems. Moreover, Jones observes that the soldiers' "curious type of existence here is altogether in parenthesis."[215] The distorting effect persists beyond the end of the war's end, demonstrating its close connection not to space but to Blunden's change in "mental method," and hindering the ability of returned soldiers to function in the mundane world.

The mythic material with which *In Parenthesis* constructs its otherworld is populated by soldiers who similarly inhabit interstitial moments. This is the trait that offers Jones the potential to revive their meaning-making capacities in the context of the early twentieth century. Paul Robichaud describes this as Jones's fascination with "cultures in transition: beginnings, ends, and new syntheses."[216] The use of the fantastic mode as a transitional apparatus enables Jones to imaginatively identify parallels between his own experiences and those of the soldiers whose stories had long provided cultural grounding. This simulates what Kathleen Staudt calls "a continuity of consciousness that enables these men to survive their increasingly incomprehensible surroundings by acknowledging their links with sign-makers who fought in past battles."[217] Bernard Bergonzi's *Heroes Twilight* similarly argues that Jones constructs "an *ad hoc* frame of reference from his acquaintance with literature, showing the continuity of human attitudes in the conditions of battle."[218] Precisely because they exist in the past, therefore,

[214] Jones, 181.
[215] Jones, xv.
[216] Robichaud, 7.
[217] Staudt, 53.
[218] Bergonzi, 194. Emphasis in original.

these soldiers imply the possibility of moving forward, of exiting the stasis implied by the "space between" that seems to the returned soldier to be permanent. In other words, they promise the eventual closure of the parentheses. By using war as common context, Jones imaginatively creates ancient soldiers and their stories as meaning-making myths, without the shared cultural assumptions on which they originally relied.

The treatment of the natural world in the poem's final pages illustrates its use of the fantastic to repurpose its mythic material in the context of modernity. As Ball, badly wounded, crawls away from the battle, he enters the domain of the Queen of the Woods. There, he sees a vision of the dead or otherwise lost members of his battalion. This passage, derived from Welsh myth, locates in the modern world a version of nature that predates Enlightenment rationalism. It represents a world ordered by "cycles … unimpeded by human history." These cycles promise the return of lost heroes in "a renewal that transcends the fortunate of battle and arbitrary victories of war."[219] Nature here is not a material phenomenon to be quantified, subdued, and supplanted. Moreover, that the natural world cannot be encompassed by human knowledge, is understood not as a premodern limitation, but as a comfort. It marks the limits of positivist historical narratives by positing an ordering principle beyond the rationalist frameworks that precipitated the front. This natural model is not articulable in a purely modern context; it can be realized only in an enchanted, premodern world. This illustrates what Jonathan Miles describes as *In Parenthesis* "seek[ing] for hope in the ruins" left by the western front.[220] At the same time, however, modern war exerts a disruptive effect on nature myth through the ways it reevaluates the potency of the natural world. An allusion to the

[219] Staudt, 97.
[220] Miles, 64.

destruction wrought by the Boar Trwyth, a mythic Celtic behemoth, evokes parallels with the effects of industrialized warfare on western Europe.[221] Though mythologized, the boar represents a fundamentally natural force; yet its closest equivalent is a detonating chemical shell. Kathleen Staudt argues that this episode calls attention to "magically and ultimately natural evils of legend, over which no humans had control, and the evils of the contemporary world order, which are largely human-made, yet which violate our nature."[222] Thus, if premodern ideas of nature offer hope in modern war, the war calls attention to the destructive forces of nature.

As the paradigm of the otherworld dictates, however, *In Parenthesis* is equally concerned with the differences that distinguish its parallel modes and their associated time periods. This opposition is the source of Ball's (as well as the text's) dilemma: how best to interpret and thereby navigate the front. For Jones, the essential difference is a question of epistemologies, and ways of being in the world:

> [We] are generally at one with the creaturely world inherited from our remote beginnings … Yet must we do gas-drill, be attuned to many newfangled technicalities, respond to increasingly exacting mechanical devices; some fascinating and compelling, others sinister in the extreme, all requiring a strange and new direction of the mind.[223]

Jones's description suggests a novel alienation from the patterns and orders of the natural world, distinguished by the reordering of mechanization, and the change it effects in the minds of those obliged to navigate it. Because this reordering occurs through willful human action, and yet without a viable humanist framework through which to comprehend it, it defies claims of continuity. The "new and strange direction of the

[221] Jones, 86.
[222] Staudt, 66-67.
[223] Jones, xiv.

mind," which emerges in response, "makes nonsense of the unity that an older culture saw between the embrace of lovers and the embrace of battle," as the epistemological parallels that govern the representation of war disintegrate.[224] Thus, though the text passes freely back and forth between its two signifying frameworks, it cannot inhabit both in the same breath. The effect is to demand a choice between the two – to insist that Ball, and the reader, select an actionable mode of interpretation.

The preface of *In Parenthesis* gestures this dilemma, and to the ultimate irreconcilability of the text's dual modes. The preface emphasizes that *In Parenthesis* confines itself to the early years of the war, concluding "early in July 1916." After this date, it tells us, the war "hardened into a more relentless, mechanical affair." The early portion featured "elbow-room for idiosyncrasy that connected one with a less excited past … [which] seemed to terminate after the Somme."[225] This suggests that the capacity of the fantastic to render meaning through traditional mythic systems in the context of modern war is negated by later events. It is thus a tacit admission of the limits inherent in the representational strategy of *In Parenthesis*. Deploying the fantastic in parallel with the mimetic necessarily arrives at an impasse where a choice must be made between the two, as one or the other loses its capacity to signify. Ending the narrative at this point suggests either an inability or unwillingness to foreclose potential meanings by settling on a single interpretive lens. The ambivalence this creates reflects contemporary cultural searches for meaning. Paul Robichaud has argued that Jones emphasizes "cultural transformation [that] addresses the upheavals of mid-twentieth-century Europe, but also

[224] Staudt, 15.
[225] Jones, ix.

potentially speaks to our own sense of being postmodern, but not yet something else."[226] Through its refusal to narrate beyond the Somme, *In Parenthesis* emblematizes the uncertainty of a culture whose available myths have ceased to provide meaning, but which has yet to produce viable replacements.

The final chapter of *In Parenthesis* presents John Ball with the dilemma of choosing between these two unsustainable signifying schemas. The text concludes with an extended account of the Somme assault on Mamet Wood. During the battle, Ball's battalion is sent to dislodge a German gun emplacement. Ball is seriously wounded (as was Jones), and he escapes back into the woods. In this passage, the various linguistic registers of the text intermingle and collide. Modernity blends with antiquity, bringing their contradictions to a crisis point. The elevating language of myth intermingles with cockney slang. The naturalistic landscape of the woods becomes indistinguishable from the technologies of war operating within it. The soldiers' bodies intermingle with the technology used to make them appear whole: "glass eyes to see/and synthetic space parts to walk in the Triumphs."[227] Even the physical shape of the poem blurs the boundaries between its competing registers. Lines are arranged as if they belong to an epic poem, but they follow no consistent meter, and later abandon this organization in favor of prose. As a result, the account resists evaluation in terms of any single standard or set of expectations. But it also displays the unsustainability of a war account that operates on multiple, contradictory signifying systems. As the text shifts between interpretive lenses at increasing speed, and ultimately undermines the distinction, the effect on the reader is dizzying. Neither the modern nor the antique context can be understood without the

[226] Robichaud, 7.
[227] Jones,

other, and yet the meaning-making structures do not transfer. These clashing contexts, and the tipping point to which they bring the text, are embodied in the time and space of the Mamet Wood assault.

Ball's rifle exemplifies the affinities and contradictions that create tension between the modern and antique models of war. It thus comprises the focal point of Ball's choice between fantasy and reality. The rifle is invested with the various contexts that define the Great War: positivist ideology, relationships between human and technology, and heroic virtue. When Ball is wounded during the assault, he is obliged to abandon the rifle as he makes his way to safety. The momentousness of his decision is marked by an extended reflection on the weapon's value and significance. The text presents the rifle in terms that endow something like personal weapon of a chivalric hero, but which also mark it unmistakably as a product of industrial manufacture.

> It's the thunder-besom for us/
> it's the bright bough borne/
> it's the tensioned yew for a Genoese jammed arbalest … It's R. S. M. O'Grady/
> says, it's the soldier's best friend if you care for the working parts and let us be/
> 'aving those springs released smartly in company billets on wet forenoons …'[228]

The successive parallel definitions evoke correlative weapons of history and myth. "[T]hunder-besom" suggests an ancient, mythic weapon that draws on the power of nature, reflecting the problematic conflation of nature and technology that helped to create the representational challenges of the front. The alliterative structure of "bright bough borne" mimics the chivalric romance, hinting at a sacral character to the weapon's potency. On the other hand, the "Genoese jammed arbalest," an early predecessor of the

[228] Jones, 183.

gun, points toward the beginnings of mechanization in warfare while still maintaining an ironic distance from the mass-produced materiel of the Great War. The effect is an almost biblical recitation of the rifle's epistemological ancestry, which then collapses into R. S. M. O'Grady's affected, civilian cockney. The rifle's mythic weight collides with the banality of modern, industrialized war. It is both deeply personal and standard issue. The passage comprises Ball's elegiac reverie for the weapon when he is obliged to abandon it. Yet O'Grady's apparent interruption of this reflective moment actually continues the catalogue by carrying on the rifle's redefinition. Although his entry is marked by an ironic/realist turn in language, it is only the competing modern framework – the "mental method" – that meaningfully distinguishes it. The disjunctive effect is the result of irreconcilable interpretive lenses. These collaborate in the creation of the meaning with which Ball's rifle is invested, but they likewise demand a determination on the part of the reader and Ball himself.

The text attempts to solve this crisis by further integrating its interpretive lenses in the character of the rifle. As Ball continues to reflect on his dilemma, the rifle's dual natures begin to collaborate in the construction of meaning. Its technical specificities are cast as the source of its distinctiveness. It is through the mechanical particularities that Ball recognizes the rifle as his own. As it more greatly emphasizes minute, technical details, the text personifies the rifle, and references shift from the use of "it" to "her," seeming briefly to take on the character of a romantic ode:

> You've known her hot and cold.
> You would choose her from among many.
> You know her by her bias, and by her exact error at 300, and by the deep scar at the small, by the fair flaw in her grain, above the lower sling-swivel – but leave it under the oak.[229]

[229] Jones, 184.

The affection expressed is not realized through the weapon's accomplishments or sacred character, but through its seemingly insignificant details – even, and perhaps particularly, through its flaws. And yet, because they mark the weapon as Ball's, they cause it to take on a personal weight more often associated with the hero's weapon. The rifle's uniqueness, along with the attendant personification, emerges through the remnants of mass production that mark it. In effect, this passage constitutes an attempt to derive traditional mythic significance from the modern. It practices Attebery's "yoking [of] two incompatible systems of belief" by locating the rifle at the intersection of two cultural frameworks.[230] Without traditional mythic context, the idea of a personified weapon would be unintelligible; Ball's decision to leave it behind would be meaningless. Without the context of the modern, the rifles would be unremarkable; modernity provides it with specificity and thus distinctiveness. Because these competing contexts conspire to provide the weapon with its unique significance, Ball's decision to abandon it is momentous, and disrupts their momentary, unstable equilibrium. The return to "it" in the final line resonates because it signifies a disavowal of the tensions the rifle exemplifies.

That the rifle's distinctiveness emerges from its apparent interchangeability evokes the fungibility with which industrialized war endows soldiers. Recalling the later portions of the war, Jones remarks "how impersonal … each new draft" of incoming soldiers began to appear.[231] The relationship between Ball and his rifle calls into question the concept of standard-issue materiel, implicitly critiquing the anonymity of and the soldiers who will step in to replace Ball. Bergonzi's *Heroes Twilight* argues that Ball himself epitomizes this fungibility in the form of an everyman status that is itself derived

[230] *Stories About Stories*, 26.
[231] Jones, ix.

from mythic sources. Through Ball, Jones "reproduces a set of shared experience and transcends the limitations of the purely individual standpoint." But, in keeping with the pattern identified above, he notes that the modern world lacks "a shared scheme of communal values and assumptions," preventing the reader from fully identifying with Ball.[232] What we have, then, is two distinct models of anonymity, which once again collaborate and clash in constructing meaning around Ball. Anonymity in the traditional, everyman sense, mingles with anonymity as interchangeable human materiel. Ball, like his rifle, is suspended between these two interpretive possibilities. Either his anonymity makes him representative, or it makes him replaceable. Even if both are true, they are mutually unsustainable; one must ultimately win out. Neither interpretive framework provides a definitive guide to action.

By abandoning the rifle, therefore, Ball rejects the interpretive dilemma it represents. Though it is tempting to read his choice as a straightforward pacifist rejection of warfare (and certainly this dimension is present), this ignores the meanings with which the text invests the rifle. It has been interwoven with the contradictory cultural frameworks that instruct Ball on his relationship with war as such. Moreover, his decision does not proceed from a rational evaluation of his dilemma. Indeed, "but leave it under the oak" seems to interrupt his contemplation, apparently without proximate cause. Ball acts on a pre-rational desire for survival, which effaces his deliberative process entirely. Emphasizing this, Ball's decision is portrayed concurrently with his vision of the Queen of the Woods, perhaps the most explicitly fantastic moment of the text. The Queen, whose closest corollary is the traditional fairy queen, holds court over Ball's killed and

[232] 194-95.

otherwise lost comrades, standing vigil for the dead and honoring the living. Staudt argues that she represents the culmination of a cycle of renewal, contrasting the rituals of the front, "in which human sacrifice takes place without a consequent renewal of the land."[233] But we might rather see the literalization of both sides of Tolkien's Escape of the Prisoner/Flight of the Deserter dichotomy. Ball's retreat certainly suggests desertion, fleeing the front to the relative safety of the fantastic forest. At the same time, however, he acts in response to the unbearable circumstance of modern war, in the interest of his very survival. Ball's course manifests the fraught status of the fantastic in the modern world. It is both necessary and suspect, a retreat and an escape.

Moreover, the text rejects the fantastic as a livable state. The Queen's dominance over the scene quickly gives way to the mundane again. In seeming response to his vision, Ball finally discards the rifle, giving way to the relative peace provided by a tree trunk to slump against. There he waits, "next to the Jerry/and Sergeant Jerry Coke," waiting for stretcher-bearers to carry them further from the battle.[234] The text concludes with an ironic declaration of its significance, having failed to derive actionable guidance from the events it portrays. This is true whether they are cast as fantastic or mundane; the Queen of the Woods is no more viable in a modern context than the madness and violence of the front. Although a comfort, the renewal she offers is not sustainable, nor does the text provide any clear means to attain it in the first place. The idea of renewal, with its attendant return to a pre-modern relationship to nature, is only expressible via imaginative access to the unreal.

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[233] Staudt, 90.
[234] Jones, 187.

In Parenthesis constructs an otherworld from linguistic registers that represent opposing epistemologies, but their mutual irreconcilability prevents Ball from learning to navigate either one. The cultural beliefs that underpin genuine myth and make it actionable are absent in the modern world. The realities of modern war, on the other hand, are incomprehensible precisely because they lack these contexts. The existing myths on which Jones draws are incapable of maintaining a meaning-making balance with modernity. The text thus concludes with an aporia. Ball, unable to make rational sense of the war, finds that myth is only accessible via the fantastic. He thus rejects the question. All that remains as a motivating force is survival instinct, giving way to resignation when he exhausts himself.

J. R. R. Tolkien: A Mythology of Modernity

Like Blunden and Jones, J. R. R. Tolkien was trouble by the inability of traditional frameworks to render modern war comprehensible. In contrast, however, Tolkien circumvented representational strategies as a primary solution. Instead, Tolkien constructed a speculative otherworld, located in the past, and capable of anticipating the uniquely modern horrors of the First World War. The resultant texts inscribe the destructive potential of industrialized warfare backward into mythic antiquity. Blunden and Jones draw on traditional mythic material to represent the war, and both ultimately arrive at a limit to myth's capacity to render meaning from the experience. Tolkien's contemporary work, on the other hand, invests the mythic tradition with the disruptive lessons of modernity. These early writings utilize the fantastic to revise civilizational

narratives constructed around positivist ideologies. They imagine a cultural myth that is, from its inception, seeded with the potential for the Somme. Nature in these texts is portrayed in technological terms, retroactively creating a precedent for modern advances that elevated technology to the level of natural phenomena. This enables a strategy that does not seek to render the war on its own terms, in which it appears to be an impossibility. By allowing the modern to reevaluate and revise myth, the fantastic permits Tolkien to engage directly with the epistemological conflicts the war engendered. These writings, in other words, constitute an attempt to construct a mythic system capable of providing structure to, and extracting meaning from, modern war.

By abandoning realistic representation, Tolkien's work in part occludes its own connection and response to the front. The influence of the war on his writing can thus be difficult to detect. This is particularly true of his later work, which exhibits a tendency to suppress even further those affinities that are detectable in earlier versions. But even in these texts, the Great War at times peeks through, and when it does, it is often in the landscapes that make up Tolkien's otherworld. Ironically, much as Blunden's landscape is a vehicle for the fantastic, in Tolkien's fantastic narrative, the landscape suggests something of the real. Each gestures toward the other by its disruptive present. Tolkien has famously acknowledged, for example, that "The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme."[235] The two landscapes – one a sunken, corpse-choked mire, the other a rocky, barren wasteland – certainly conjure images of No Man's Land. It is fair to suggest that many young people first encounter the imagery of the Somme in Mordor, or first imagine the

[235] Tolkien, *Letters*, 303.

sensation of barbed wire in its brambles and their "long stabbing thorns … hooked barbs that rent like knifes."[236] But representation here merely gestures at deeper affinities. Mordor realizes the dominance of technological systems over the natural world. By the time of its conception, however, this affinity had been concealed both by Tolkien's decades of revision, as well as the expectations of twentieth-century literature that had been established by modernist literary criticism.

Tolkien's wartime writing more clearly presents a historical narrative that creates an imaginative line of identification between the soldiers of the Great War and their mythic counterparts. In these early texts, explicitly located in the ancient past of earth, violence and glorious battle repeatedly diminish the world, only for the diminished world to forget the lessons of the past. John Clute refers to this process as "thinning" – the perpetual process by which modern high fantasy worlds forget and fail the promise of their pasts. In this light, positivist historical narratives only appear coherent because of the recurrent forgetting that effaces their consequences. *The Book of Lost Tales* embodies this dynamic because it is presented as a historical narrative, told by a defeated people to an uninitiated listener. The listener – Eriol or Ælfwine, varying according to time of writing – is an explorer from mainland Europe. At the opening of the narrative, he is shipwrecked on the shores of ancient not-yet-England. The majority of the text reproduces the mythic prehistory of his own continent that he learns from the island's elven inhabitants.[237] Ælfwine's ignorance of his own history thus appears as the result of

[236] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 1148.
[237] From this point forward, I use 'Ælfwine,' rather than 'Eriol.' 'Ælfwine' persisted in later documents and seems to have been Tolkien's ultimate choice. It should be noted, however, that in some texts, it is less a name than a title – a translation of 'elf friend.' 'Eriol' is also given different meanings at various points in the manuscripts. The distinctions are not insignificant, and a genealogical study could certainly offer insight into the reasons behind the changes. I have chosen a single name not to suppress these distinctions,

a long process of cultural forgetting. This prehistory is comprised of a series of stories in which an immense, extended war coincides with the downward trajectory of Tolkien's diminishing world. In effect, *The Book of Lost Tales* is the story of Ælfwine re-learning the disastrous consequences of warfare, millennia before Tolkien's generation believed itself to have made the discovery. Because it presents the narrative from the perspective of an uncomprehending learner, *The Book of Lost Tales* argues that the inhabitants of history always experience their present as an upheaval – a moment defined by the overthrow of what has come before. Tolkien locates common ground between contemporary soldiers and his mythic figures precisely in the uncertainty of unprecedented experience, and the attendant imperative to re-evaluate and revise the past. The text highlights their own sense of being modern, of inhabiting a transitionary state in the way described by Paul de Man. Like Blunden and Private Ball, Tolkien's characters perpetually renegotiate frameworks that no longer provide guidance in new and unimaginable contexts. The potential for the seeming break with continuity experienced in the First World War is made implicit in his mythic structure.

Similarly, *The Book of Lost Tales* seeds its mythology with technology's potential overthrow of nature by creating linguistic affinities between natural and technological processes. Nature and technology are intermingled into a single ordering principle, distinguished from one another primarily by interpretive framework. Once again, because this is established in a mythic context, located in the imaginative past, the *Tales* create a precedent for the apparent upending of natural hierarchies by the front. This is evident from the beginning of the narrative – Tolkien's take on the biblical Genesis story. This

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but to satisfy the practical need for a single identifier for the character that fills this thematic and narrative space.

story of Arda's creation might better be described as the story of its "construction." The account reads as much like an artisan's undertaking as it does a mythic narrative. The Valar, Tolkien's deific pantheon, are granted a vision of the world as it is meant to be. Taking this vision to be a sort of blueprint, they descend into the primordial world in order to implement it. They construct "two towers" to light the world, one each "to the North and South … upon them mighty lamps one upon each."[238] The source of light for Tolkien's prehistoric world is thus technological – produced by ingenuity, rather than decree or natural inclination. To a twentieth-century reader, the lamps are neither magical nor mysterious: they differ only in scale and potency from commonplace modern technology. The text further demystifies the lamps by focusing on minute details, such as the material from which they are constructed: "fashion[ed] of gold and silver, and the pillars … shone like blue crystal; and … rang like metal" when struck. It is Melko, Tolkien's Lucifer analog, who attempts to observe the mundane utility of the lamps. He claims to have made the pillars from "an imperishable substance that he had devised; and he lied, for he knew that they were made of ice."[239] This lie is an attempt to elevate himself by concealing a fundamental truth: the natural world of Arda is a sort of superlative technological system, rather than something ontologically distinct. These primordial light sources differ from floor lamps in their substance in scale – not in their essential type. By this logic, dominance over the natural order simply constitutes access to higher technology. According to this mythic logic, the "demonic world" of the front is explicable because its potential is implicit in the creation of the earth.

[238] *BoLTI*, 69.
[239] *BoLTI*, 69.

What we might call the technologizing of the natural order is a consistent trope in *The Book of Lost Tales*, particularly those sections that deal with the actions and methods of the Valar. These divine beings operate less like gods enacting their wills than like artisans of immense scale and skill. They shape the world via direct interaction on the material level, manipulating matter much as a craftsman might, despite operating on a mythic scale. The sun, for example, is created by enclosing the celestial body inside the rind of an enormous fruit. But even as it advances this fantastic premise, the text devotes particular attention to the material properties of the object and the physical demands of the task:

> Thereupon began the great smithying of the Sun, and this was the most cunning and marvelous of all the works of Aulë … Of that perfect rind a vessel did he make, diaphanous and shining, yet of a tempered strength, for with spells of his own he overcame its brittleness nor in any way was its subtle delicacy thereby diminished … [He] fashioned that vessel like a great ship broad of beam, laying one half of the rind within the other so that its strength might not be broken.[240]

Described explicitly as a "smithying," the process is portrayed chiefly as the overcoming of a series of technical challenges. In effect, the text describes a feat of engineering. The brittleness needs to be addressed. It needs to be both beautiful and strong. The solutions blend the fantastic ("spells of his own") with the mundane (laying the rinds together to double their strength). Neither is obviously privileged above, or even clearly differentiated from, the other. At such an extreme remove from twentieth-century modernity, interpretive lenses coalesce in a way like that experienced by soldiers on the front. The concluding image inverts the epistemological hierarchy that we might expect. The sun's fashioning is compared to the manner of a ship, rather than vice versa; the

[240] *BoLTI*, 208.

technological referent is given primacy in the construction of meaning.[241] By presenting nature as a system subject to technological frameworks, the text anticipates the upending of Enlightenment hierarchies that is observable in accounts of the front.

This reading complicates portrayals of Tolkien that cast him as simply anti-modern. Such arguments tend to assert that his work is "largely born out of a reaction against the modern world in which he lived: nostalgia and wish-fulfillment."[242] These readings, however, rely on the assumption of a clear distinction between past and present within Tolkien's writing. Rather, in my reading, the conditions that give rise to the crises of twentieth-century modernity, particularly those that characterize writing of the Great War, are written into Tolkien's mythic past. Broadly speaking, the arc of history in *The Book of Lost Tales* represents the process by which these conditions manifest in the changing relationships between the world's peoples and the natural world. Consequently, rather than an unprecedented upheaval, contemporary modernity is cast as the latest manifestation of a process that is synonymous with the positivist march of civilization. Tolkien's narrative draws a straight line between the mythic past and the Great War. This is distinct from a simple equation in which technological progress invariably signifies the downfall of civilization. Such a worldview could justifiably be called regressive. Rather, technology in Tolkien's cosmology has something of an ambivalent status; the value of a given technological innovation is derived from the type of relationship it engenders with the world at large. The undertakings of the Vala, Aulë, model technological innovation as craftsmanship, which is defined by mutual accomplishment and enrichment. As is the

[241] At this point in Tolkien's mythic history, ships have already been invented, also by the Valar. Thus, while Aulë's capabilities as a craftsman exceed our own, the end results are analogous.
[242] Manlove, 206.

case with the Sun, Aulë's inventions are intended for general betterment. This model is contrasted by the works produced by Melko, which engender dominance.[243] His creations most often facilitate the pursuit of war – a version of war that bears striking similarities to modern industrialized warfare. Melko's invention of weaponry epitomizes this dynamic. Weaponry first appears in the *Tales* when Melko arms himself with "swords very sharp and cruel" in order to murder a contingent of guards and make off with the Silmarils – holy heirlooms of an Elven family.[244] This murder and theft precipitates the extended downfall of the elves that Galadriel describes in *The Fellowship of the Ring* as "the long defeat."[245] In contrast to Aulë's work, the passage describing the theft emphasizes the violence and violation for which weaponry was invented. *The Book of Lost Tales* thus contextualizes technology by its use, rather than its function or categorization. The demonic in Tolkien's otherworld is thus a manifestation of the same Enlightenment ideology that "seeks [only] to learn from nature … how to dominate wholly both it and other human beings."[246]

In "The Fall of Gondolin," Tolkien's mythic narrative explicitly positions an army of chivalric romance against a modern, mechanized force. The tale clearly manifests the ambivalence of weapons of war in Tolkien's writing, and also contains the clearest reference to the Great War in any of his fiction. It constitutes an exploration of the

[243] Late in life, Tolkien asserted that Melko's fundamental ambition was material domination of the world – or, perhaps more accurately, domination of the world's material. [Tolkien, J. R. R. *Morgoth's Ring*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 394-98.]
[244] *BoLTI*, 159-60. In later versions, the first weapons are made in secret by elves at Melkor's behest. They first appear publicly when segments of the same family draw them on one another in rivalry. The elven downfall is more explicitly associated with weapons of war as well; the elven prince Fëanor and his sons swear an oath on their swords. This oath motivates many of the early violent acts that the narrative casts as irredeemable follies (*The Silmarillion*, 83).
[245] 443.
[246] Horkheimer and Adorno, 2.

contradictions between traditional ideals of war and the carnage of the western front. Among the first sections of *The Book of Lost Tales* to be written, the story was (perhaps apocryphally) begun in the trenches, and completed during Tolkien's recovery from trench foot in an English hospital. It is the first of several texts that describe Melko's sudden offensive against the heretofore hidden city of Gondolin, the last stronghold of the elves in Beleriand. The account includes an extensive epic catalogue of the arms and insignia of eleven noble houses within the city's forces. This includes each house's colors, insignia, leader, and character, all rendered in language that emphasizes their beauty, nobility, and heroism. Tolkien dials up his signature archaic language, as well, including the frequent inversion of syntax. The effect is to elevate and aestheticize the army, and to emphasize its antiquity in contrast to Melko's forces. The house of Echthelion is representative:

> the people of the Fountain, and Echtelion was their lord, and silver and diamonds were their delight; and their swords very long and bright and pale did they wield, and they went into battle to the music of flutes.[247]

We picture a highly aestheticized scene. The description emphasizes artistry and craftsmanship in their equipment, even including music. To a twentieth-century reader, this image is naturally suspect. In fact, Fussell has described such language as one of "the ultimate casualties of [The Great War]."[248] In part because of the lessons of the war, we have learned to see such high-minded language as a contrivance to conceal horrific realities and render them tolerable. Tolkien's use of such language thus exposes him to potential accusations that he is complicit in perpetuation of such horrors. But by locating his conflict in the mythic past, Tolkien emphasizes the commonality between the armies

[247] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Book of Lost Tales II*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. (New York: Ballantine, 1984), 175.
[248] Fussell, 12.

of Gondolin and twentieth-century subalterns. Both are the helpless victims of industrialized warfare. The aestheticization of the elven army contrasts and thus emphasizes the violence of modern war, rather than concealing it.

Melko's forcers are perhaps best described as a technological demonic horde. His weaponry amalgamates fantastic creatures with modern technology, recalling Sassoon's dozing dragons and Blunden's monstrous field guns. These passages emphasize the lethality and ingenuity of Melko's war machines:

> [Of] iron and flame they wrought a host of monsters … Some were all of iron so cunningly linked that they might flow like slow rivers of metal … and these were filled to their innermost depths with Orcs … others of bronze and copper were given hearts and spirits of blazing fire … yet others were creatures of pure flame that writhed like ropes of molten metal.[249]

This passage is perhaps the closest Tolkien comes to over reference to industrialized warfare at any point in his mythology. We discern echoes of troop transports, tanks, and perhaps even flamethrowers. The chivalric romances that British soldiers relied on to navigate war are pitted against the violent reality that they encountered on the front. The city is ruined, and its inhabitants slaughtered, effectively consigning the last bastion of chivalric romance to the past. As Melko's army overwhelms the city's defense, the text metonymically emphasizes those traits it shares with modern war machines. The house of Rog is overcome by "iron and flame;" "serpents of bronze with great feet for trampling … [climb] over those of iron."[250] The traditional heroic image of combat is overwhelmed by the modern army.

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[249] *BoLTII*, 167.
[250] *BoLTII*, 180-81.

The temptation to read this as a simple nostalgic allegory of an idealized past and an inglorious present is complicated by the origin shared by the elves' and Melko's weaponry. Melko is no less responsible for the creation of swords than for his iron monsters. He is likewise the first known to wield a weapon of any sort in violence. Despite the apparent nobility of their bearing, the elves' weapons are of the same essential type as Melko's. The aestheticizing lens through which the text portrays them is undermined by and exposed as precisely what it is – a lens applied to the object, an interpretive framework. The swords manifest the same relationship of dominance to the world at large as iron serpents and field guns, only less effectively. Only because they are comparatively primitive, and therefore inferior in positivist terms, are they imaginatively differentiated. Recall also that the accounts in *The Book of Lost Tales* are contextualized within the narrative as stories of the distant past. The aestheticizing lens is thus the manifestation of a nostalgic perspective within the text, and like the narrative to which it is applied, is dismantled via the destructive potency of modernized, material power.

"Turambar and the Foalókë," which appears in close proximity to "The Fall of Gondolin," demonstrates the ambivalence of traditionally chivalric weaponry within Tolkien's mythos. Like Private Ball, Turambar carries and identifies with a personified companion weapon – a sword, in this case, rather than a rifle. The sword, known as Gurtholfin, exhibits the characteristics of a traditional hero's weapon far more than does Ball's rifle. It is a sword, rather than a mass-produced, standard issue rifle. Unlike Ball's rifle, Gurtholfin is not distinguished by minute imperfections. It is remarkable from its very creation. Gurtholfin is forged at Turambar's request by an elven king, "made by magic to be utterly black save at its edges, and those were shining bright and sharp as but

Gnome-steel may be."[251] It is furthermore forged not for a random battalion member on an indeterminate assignment, but for the classical hero to reclaim the homes of the king's people. Gurtholfin is possessed of narrative weight; it lacks the arbitrariness of the mass-produced modern weapon. This is reinforced by giving it a name, rendering it singular, and placing it in the literary tradition of swords like Excalibur and Beowulf's Hrunting. On the surface, therefore, Gurtholfin embodies a tradition that elevates and ennobles combat, that emphasizes heroism and conceals brutality.

However, more even than Ball, Turambar finds his weapon unsuited for heroic undertakings. Rather than nobility, Gurtholfin comes to emblematize the amorality and ambivalence inherent in weaponry and warfare. Its name, we are told, translates to "Wand of Death."[252] The name emphasizes the sword's destructive power, rather than the nobility of its purpose. But this is occluded by adherence to the tradition of the named weapon, concealing its meaning behind the translation. The uses to which Turambar puts the sword over the course of the narrative similar emphasize its violent nature. The intent with which he wields the weapon is frequently compromised. The campaign for which the blade is forged draws undue attention from his enemies, and exposes the secret kingdom of the elven king, Orodreth, resulting in its assault and downfall. Turambar's defense of the stronghold recalls the heroic last stand of any number of honorable warriors, but it is distinguished primarily by brutality and irrelevance. With Gurtholfin in hand, the attackers "fall thick about him," but he is neutralized somewhat pathetically when a battalion of archers fire on him. He is then unceremoniously driven off by the

[251] *BoLT2*, 84.
[252] *BoLT2* 84.

approach of Glorund, the Foalókë (dragon) of the title.[253] As one might expect of the hero, Turambar does return to slay the dragon, but even this is a compromised, and distinctly a-heroic victory. Having settled in (and taken over) a woodsmen's village, Turambar is given the task of protecting them from Glorund, who is expanding his territory. On his approach, Glorund is obliged to throw himself across a narrow gorge in order to cross a river below. Rather than confront the dragon in an appropriately heroic battle, Turambar climbs into the gorge, and clings to the wall as he waits for Glorund to pass. When the dragon crosses over, exposing his underside, Turambar thrusts Gurtholfin "into the vitals of the dragon even to the hilt."[254] This ultimate heroic act instead takes on the character on an a-heroic, even cowardly ambush. Once Glorund has stopped thrashing, Turambar retrieves the sword, not out of loyalty or affection, but because he "[cherishes it] beyond all his possessions, because all things died, or man or beast, whom once its edges bit."[255] Both the selfishness of his motive and the nature of Gurtholfin's value here emphasize Turambar's violent, rather than heroic, character. The passage moreover inverts the interaction between Private Ball and his rifle. Where Ball abandons the rifle despite his affection, for the salvation of his own life, Turambar retrieves the sword, despite feeling no affection toward it, because of its efficiency in taking the lives of others.

When Turambar puts Gurtholfin to purely aggressive use, however, it is remarkably effective. When he embraces the violent intent inherent in the sword's function, the text tends to validate the action by describing it in explicitly violent terms. (I

[253] *BoLT2*, 87-88.
[254] *BoLT2*, 107.
[255] *BoLT2*, 108.

mean here "validate" in the sense of illustrating consistency between action and intent, rather than endorsing the morality of the actions themselves). When Turambar kills the Easterling Brodda, who has taken over his childhood home, he "[leaps] upon the high place and ere Brodda might foresee the act he drew Gurtholfin and seizing Brodda by the locks all but [smites] his head from his body."[256] The language emphasizes both the violence and unjustified nature of Brodda's killing. The account makes clear that he is attacked without warning, and given no chance to defend himself. Moreover, Brodda has invited him to the table and offered him food. Brodda's murder (it clearly is murder), is therefore also a violation of the principle of hospitality. To emphasize this, the text explicitly describes Turambar's actions as "violent and unlawful."[257] That the strike (nearly) takes Brodda's head off his shoulders both demonstrates the force of the blow and gives a visceral impression of the death itself. The brute physicality of the act lends it something of the grotesque character that accompanies death in accounts of the Great War. Gurtholfin finds its greatest efficacy in amoral, mundane slaughter, its nearest affinity with the bayonet.

Gurtholfin's final act confirms its essentially violent character, and confirms the ambivalence with which such violence operates. Following Glorund's death, Turambar is made to see through his own heroic pretensions, perceiving himself as a self-important dupe of fate. Despairing of his futile and ultimately destructive life, he begs the sword to kill him. This is the only instance in which the sword speaks for itself, and it takes the opportunity to assert its own motivation:

> "Hail, Gurtholfin, wand of death, for thou art all men's bane and all men's lives fain wouldst thou drink… [S]lay me therefore and be swift, for life is

[256] *BoLT2*, 90.
[257] *BoLT2*, 91.

> a curse…" And Gurtholfin said: "That I will gladly do, for blood is blood, and perchance thine is not less sweet than many a one's that thou has given me ere now."[258]

Gurtholfin's declaration confirms the indifference of violence and weaponry to loyalty or intent. We see here another inversion of Private Ball and his rifle: where Ball chose to abandon its rifle, Gurtholfin here abandons its master. Or perhaps more accurately, it refutes that idea that it had a relationship to Turambar at all. In fact, this is a much more radical rejection of traditional chivalric romance than that undertaken by Jones. Ball is obligated by the circumstances and dangers of modern war to forego his feelings of attachment to his weapon. Turambar, in contrast, is not forced to consign his ideals to the past by new or unique circumstances. Rather, he finds that the ideal of noble violence has always been a fiction. Through the apparatus of the fantastic past, Tolkien projects the patterns and lessons of modern war backwards, revising the mythic systems on which traditional models of noble warfare depend.

If the tales project recurrent knowledge backward, the figure of Ælfwine allows the text to project it forward. He functions as a link between the fantastic past and modernity – "a witness and participant who observes, often experiences, and in some fashion transmits to others the stories in which he appears."[259] As the naïve hearer of the tales, Ælfwine is the lens through which the reader gains access, both to the stories and to the disruptive affect they have on received narratives of progress. The reader learns as he learns. But Ælfwine is positioned in the distant past as well – just not as distant as the tales. The reader is effectively ignorant twice over, both to the tales and to Ælfwine. His lessons have apparently been lost by to the reader, just as the tales were lost to him. The

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[258] *BoLT2*, 111-12.
[259] Flieger, Verlyn. "The Footsteps of Ælfwine." *Green Suns and Faerie: Essays on Tolkien*. Ed. Verlyn Flieger. (Kent: Kent State UP, 2012), 81.

text establishes a continuity between the reader and Ælfwine through the perpetual and ubiquitous process of forgetting. At any single point in time, one feels oneself in a state of relative discontinuity. In fact, they are failing to properly conceptualize the past, projecting illusory ideological narratives backward, with themselves as the imaginative locus that links the past to the future. *The Book of Lost Tales* imaginatively constitutes a secret prehistory that ultimately recodes and recontextualizes traditional mythic systems. The ideals derived from these traditions appear to be misinterpretations, even delusions. The positivist narratives that drove hundreds of thousands into No Man's Land are exposed and revealed to be grounded in fundamentally distorted images of the past.

The consequences of this distortion are explored in the final, unfinished chapter of *The Book of Lost Tales*. The remaining fragments appear to return to the ruined landscape of the Western Front. Ælfwine is given a glimpse of the future; the images recall realist accounts of No Man's Land and its "demonic world."

> [A]ll the beauty that was yet on earth… now goeth it all up in smoke… the setting of the Sun was blackened with the reek of fires, and the waters of the stream were fouled with the war of men and grime of strife… the destroying hands of men had torn the heather and the fern and burnt them to make sacrifice to Melko and to lust of ruin.[260]

Such a scene would not be out of place in Blunden or Sassoon. Human activity is elevated to such an extreme that it is able to fundamentally alter the natural world. The sun is occluded, streams are turned foul, and "all the beauty on the earth" is negated by violent industrial activity. Imaginatively located at the end of Tolkien's tales, however, the scene is no longer inexplicable as it was for the British army. Rather, it represents the logical endpoint of a practice of domination reaching back to antiquity, whose origins and

[260] *BoLT2*, 292.

consequences have been concealed by time and illusion. This demonic landscape is no longer a violation of the principles of civilization; it is their ultimate realization. It is not clear, however, whether Ælfwine is witnessing a future that is the result of his meeting with the elves, whether it is something his knowledge empowers him to prevent, or whether the unfolding of history is indifferent to his actions. Thus, while the fantastic allows Tolkien to speculatively construct a mythology that anticipates modern war, it nonetheless remains unclear whether it offers any actionable guidance for living in modernity.

Because it imaginatively freed language from the demand of verifiability, the fantastic provided a means by which to imagine new logics that had the potential to resolve the dilemmas of modernity. But in so doing, it altered the sources from which the imaginative frameworks emerged. This in turn created a new dilemma: how to address the transformative effect that their experience has on the myths which previously offered guidance? Blunden and Jones, each in his own way, respond by spatially and linguistically coding traditional material within and against fantastic otherworlds, located alongside the modern. Each, however, ultimately encounters limits to this strategy. Blunden is obliged to settle for an irreconcilable binary; Jones disavows the question entirely. Tolkien's early writings suggest an attempt to concretize the ways in which modern violence revises mythic imagination. The present inflects his imagined past, redefining it via the mechanism of the fantastic, thus opening it to the generation of new meanings. But while Tolkien finds the means to make modernity explicable via myth, he nonetheless appears at a loss for actionable guidance in the modern context. If the transition to the fantastic renders the war in some way communicable, the transition back

seems to negate the meanings created. It is as if, like the traveler who stumbles into the otherworld, and the soldier who finds himself on the front, the stories cannot pass through unchanged. What remains is the question: how are we to grapple with these irrevocably changed epistemologies? What new significance do these works take on if they represent not merely a break with the past, but a deep and permanent reimagining of it? What new shape does *In Parenthesis* take if Private Ball is a lens on the story of King Arthur or *Y Gododdin*, rather than the primary subject? If we can no longer think of the Somme River without conjuring images of tank warfare, we can equally no longer think of Excalibur without invoking Private Ball's abandoned gun. Each renders the other in new terms in order to better represent new conditions. And, as we will see in the next chapter, to better respond to new needs.

Chapter 3: War Trauma and the Fantastic

Although the realities of the Great War defied mimetic representation and thus compelled recourse to the fantastic, this does not sufficiently explain why writers so regularly (and in the cases of Jones and Tolkien, to such extreme degrees) turned to the fantastic as a lens through which to interpret their experiences. High modernists, for example, relied on formal novelty to address modern disruptions without abandoning mimetic representation. Why, then, did the war writers select the fantastic from the variety of available representative strategies? Trauma theory provides the context necessary to answer this question. The war was rendered unspeakable for many veterans by social and personal imperatives. These were so potent that Wyatt Bonikowski identifies them as the major cause of the years of relative silence from the eventual war memoirists.[261] When war memoirs began to emerge in large numbers during the late 1920s, their authors had developed strategies to resolve the conflict between the need for silence and the compulsion to speak. They empowered themselves to express to an uncomprehending audience a truth that they themselves often could not acknowledge. These strategies frequently held the experience at a distance, navigated the complexities of traumatic memory, and inhabited the space between concrete experiences and fictionalized storytelling. The populations of England and the western world interpreted as trauma not only the personal experiences of veterans, but the attendant social and cultural upheavals they engendered. The value of the fantastic to writers in the interwar

[261] Bonikowski, 4.

period becomes clear when we apply the logic of trauma and traumatic recovery to the texts that the war writers finally produced.

War writers drew on the fantastic, as well as other forms of fictionalization, to fulfill what Judith Herman has called "the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy" imposed upon those who undergo traumatic experiences.[262] Herman describes the need of trauma survivors to articulate and communicate their experience, coupled with the social stigma that attends public acknowledgement of trauma. During the war, the public's material and ideological investment in the imperial project coalesced in a multitude of discursive practices designed to support the national war effort. The realities of the front threatened to undermine political and cultural rationalizations of the war at home. As such, even among sympathetic listeners, no public discourse existed that was designed to accommodate overt objection to the war itself. There was a socially-enforced limit on the traumatized soldier's ability to convey the totality of his experience. For war writers, this exacerbated the stigma associated with traumatic experiences that ran counter to accepted ideological narratives. Moreover, both because of the nature of the front and the vague and distorting nature of memory, much of their experience was not knowable or interpretable through rational means.

With its long history of rendering the unspeakable into language, the fantastic offered an alternative to the ideologically-defined rational. Consider, for example, the pervasiveness of the ghost story's use in representing the disruptive presence of unacknowledged violence located in the past. Colin Davis has described ghost stories as "a temporary interruption in the fabric of reality, a glitch in the matrix," which demands

[262] Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 1.

that "the proper moral and epistemological order of things … be put back to rights." This suggests that the damage of trauma not only to the individual, but precisely to the epistemological frameworks that underlie morality and knowability, is implicit within the disruptive effects of the fantastic.[263] The fantastic provided, in a way that realism could not, the ability to faithfully render the experiences of the front without laying explicit claim to the trauma at their core. By circumventing the questions of fact versus fiction, and ultimately rendering it irrelevant, the fantastic enabled writers to simultaneously reveal and conceal their wartime experiences. Tolkien's early writing applies this practice on a civilizational scale by constructing a world whose history is wrought with trauma. These traumatic histories manifest in both the landscape and the narrative, transforming the present into a world coded in terms of its past atrocities. Rather than a single, exceptional ghost story, trauma permeates Tolkien's world – a ubiquitous, haunting presence. The action of Tolkien's extended legendarium is thus interpretable as a civilization's attempts – both successful and otherwise – to cope with the determinative power of its own traumatic history.

Memory and Traumatic Narrative

Memory of trauma is defined in part by a lack of the continuity that allows us to derive meaning from past events. For the war writers, trauma was recognizable by the distortions it imposed on the memories of its occurrence. In contrast to normal memory, traumas that manifest in this way tend to be remembered as a series of disconnected

[263] *Davis*, 3.

sensations and images – a collection of instants, rather than a single coherent event.[264] Recall Ford Madox Ford's description of the "little pictures" that comprised his memories of the front: "towers, and roofs, and belts of trees and sunlight … men, burst into mere showers of blood and dissolving into muddy ooze." The fragmentary nature of Ford's recollections illustrates the effect that trauma can have on memory. Although vivid, the images lack context. Ford is unable to situate them firmly in the larger world of his experiences. The memories likewise resist his attempts to render them into language. "[T]he mind," he says, "stops dead, and something in the brain stops and shuts down."[265] There is a difficulty of representation, but beyond that, something within Ford himself that thwarts any attempt to write his experiences. If representative challenges render the events of the Great War incommunicable, trauma makes them what Herman calls "unspeakable" – "violations of the social contract … too terrible to utter aloud."[266] This combination of resistance to language with an utter lack of available context means that traumatic memories cannot be easily conveyed as narrative. They are "wordless and static," do not "develop or progress in time … [or] reveal [the survivor's] feelings or interpretation of events."[267] The traumatic event exists in the memory as if it belonged to a third party; it is incapable of being reconciled into the narrative of one's life. The goal of recovery is thus "to reconnect fragments, to reconstruct history, [and] to make meaning of … present symptoms in light of past events."[268] By disrupting the unity of

[264] Herman, 38.
[265] Ford, 79.
[266] Herman, 1.
[267] Herman, 175.
[268] Herman, 3.

recollection in this way, the effects of trauma make continuity impossible, and render the present illegible in terms of the past.

This disruption of continuity was reflected in the sense of a break with that past that overwhelmed many modernist authors. The war writers found affinity between the state of their culture and their personal experiences of trauma. The process of narrativization was uniquely suited to addressing both. The act of telling their story rebuilds a connection to the past self. The arduous task of putting the experience into words allows it to be "integrated into the survivor's life story."[269] Narrating the traumatic event allows the survivor to write back into their memory an experience that previously existed primarily as an instance of disjuncture between past and present, effectively restoring a sense of continuity between their life before the trauma and after.[270] Narrativization makes disconnected events accessible to interpretation by creating context and simulating the presence of causation. In this way, it is a distinctly literary act. Ricoeur argues that narrative as a practice constitutes a schema that facilitates "intelligible signification" on the part of otherwise "multiple and scattered events." This does not mean, for example, that a traumatic event becomes justified or even rationally explicable. Rather, it simply means that the event is situated in its proper chronological place in the memory. By consigning trauma to the past in this way, it is robbed of its ongoing deterministic power, its persistent disruptive presence in their life. Laying claim to trauma by writing it into their past therefore opens possibilities for the future not determined by the paralysis that comes with a loss of continuity.[271]

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[269] Herman, 175.
[270] Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative, Volume I*, Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), x.
[271] Herman, 195.

By telling the story of their trauma, however, the teller integrates it into their life and thus lays personal claim to trauma its effects. In doing so, they risk social stigma. Because traumatic events so dramatically violate social mores, they compel denial. This is true not only of the survivor, but of the audience who hears their story. Those who share their stories as narrative often encounter an audience unreceptive to their message, either because they are unwilling or incapable. Their alternative is therefore to reject the teller who delivers the message and appears to embody its disruptive effect. Consequently, public responses to stories of trauma often question the value of the survivor:

> whether … [they] are entitled to care and respect or deserving of contempt, whether they are genuinely suffering or malingering, whether their histories are true or false and, if false, whether imagined or maliciously fabricated.[272]

The result of forthrightness is often outright rejection by the listener. The speaker is yoked to the trauma and the disruption it represents. Rather than contemplate the consequences of the story, the choice is to banish both story and the speaker who tells it. The question of truth that attends the trauma narrative is thus less about the facts and details contained within the story. Instead, it concerns the more fundamental threat trauma narratives represent to social truths. Survivors are silenced by marginalization. Even if their story is not unspoken, it can remain unheard as "the most traumatic events of [their lives] take places outside the realm of socially validated reality."[273] The necessary act of putting their experience into words thus poses the very real social risks for survivors; laying explicit claim to traumatic experience threatens to mark them with

[272] Herman, 8.
[273] Herman, 8.

trauma's stigma. By utilizing narrative to construct meaning, they create the conditions to be seen as a manifestation of that meaning's implications. Despite the personal necessity of truthful narration, survivors face similarly powerful social pressure to conceal their traumatic experiences.

For soldiers returning from World War I, the compulsion to conceal was perhaps even greater. In Britain, the traumatized soldier signified not merely the experience of an individual. Rather, the soldier – with his traumatized mind and wounded body – came to represent the post-war state of England itself. The shell-shocked soldier threatened not only personal, internalized truths. His existence also called into question many of the ideological frameworks that upheld the war, the nation, and the empire. These included the closely-intertwined concepts of national honor and masculinity. Leo Braudy argues in *From Chivalry to Terrorism* that during the British war years, "military masculinity was the core of national consciousness."[274] The soldier discursively embodied the ideal national character as a masculine warrior. In contrast with what many saw as a degenerate modern world, the war was widely expected to "rescue the nation from moral decay and bring men back to the basic truths from which they had wandered … under a new banner of purity."[275] By imparting on England's young men the role of the honorable chivalric warrior, the war would re-establish traditional western cultural dominance. The outward symptoms of traumatized soldiers, however, bore a clear resemblance to traditionally feminized symptoms of hysteria.[276] Their visibility thus "endangered the

[274] Braudy, Leo. *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 378.
[275] Braudy, 374.
[276] Herman, 20.

clear distinction between genders … regarded as an essential cement of society."[277] This led war trauma to be interpreted as what George Mosse refers to as a "social disease." In this synecdochic relationship between the individual(s) and society, the individual's symptoms emblematize a larger social degeneration. The reverse also became true: the symptoms of war trauma were discursively transformed "from a battlefield disease into a social indicator," determining the status of those who exhibited them.[278] There was thus considerable motivation for the public to delegitimize the soldier's condition, and for the soldier to conceal his traumatic experiences.

These ideological stakes inflected the ways that war trauma was named, discussed, and treated during and after the war. Many of the initial discursive reactions to traumatized soldiers reflect an effort to isolate ideological and social frameworks from trauma's disruptive effects. The term "shell-shock" was coined by psychologist Charles Myers for widespread symptoms he attributed to the concussive force of exploding shells.[279] Ill-defined, the term was an all-purpose descriptor for "a bewildering array of anxiety disorders – mental tics, nightmares, confusion, fatigue, obsessive thoughts inexplicable aches and pains … mutism, paralysis, hysterical blindness, and hysterical deafness."[280] It reflected the medical community's inability to provide a satisfying diagnosis for the staggering number of mental casualties, but it also served the purpose of suppressing the condition's socially-disruptive potential. By consolidating such a wide variety of manifestations under this single term, medical practice effectively silenced a

[277] Mosse, George L. "Shell-shock as a Social Disease," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 1 (2000): 103.
[278] Mosse, 104.
[279] Herman, 20.
[280] Reid, Fiona. "'His nerves gave way': Shell shock, history, and the memory of the First World War in Britain," *Endeavor* 38, no. 2 (June 2014): 92.

multitude of experiences under the aegis of a comforting, physical cause. Once it became clear, however, that no connection could be established between the symptoms and proximity to exploding bombs, the public came to acknowledge that they resulted from the "emotional stress of prolonged exposure to violent death."[281] It followed that those who displayed the effects of shell-shock were deficient in some way – "of a weak disposition, fearful … [or] weak of will."[282] Excepting traumatized soldiers in this way discursively excluded them from the ideal of the soldier. Traditional models of masculinity and warfare were quarantined from the disruptive effects of trauma in an attempt to sustain their social potency. By categorizing the experiences as the exceptional effect of devalued soldiers, it was ensured that their narratives of trauma occurred, as Herman says, "outside the realm of socially validated reality."[283] The epistemological disruptions they represented were held at arm's length by virtue of the marginalization of the survivors.

Much early treatment of shell-shock was likewise centered around sustaining the masculine category of the soldier. Above all, it was designed with the goal of returning the soldier to the battlefield, rather than the well-being of the soldier. At the most extreme, this included physical manipulation of soldiers' limbs, attempts to shame and/or cajole soldiers out of exhibiting their symptoms, and in the case of Dr. Lewis Ralph Yealland, application of electric shock.[284] However, even more progressive approaches, such as those employed by Dr. W. H. R. Rivers, had the objective of returning the patient to combat readiness. Psychiatric treatment during the war was not about the soldier's

[281] Herman, 20.
[282] Mosse, 103.
[283] Herman, 8.
[284] Reid, 96.

mental health, but about "restoring his proper relation to authority" in the context of the imperial system.[285] Treatment was judged to be successful in as much as it re-inscribed the subject with ideals of masculinity, or at least with the inclination to perform them in the combat theater. By doing so, it suppressed the disturbances caused by the survivor's condition, and reaffirmed the integrity of nationalist and imperial ideologies. Regardless of method, therefore, psychiatric practice was effectively a part of the state apparatus, constituted around the goal of silencing the disruptive narratives of trauma victims. In other words, the psychology of the veteran was deeply entangled with – indeed, inseparable from – the political imperatives of the empire.

Because restoration to the role of citizen-soldier performed the role of a social substitute for actual rehabilitation, there was considerable conflict between the interests of empire and the needs of the traumatized soldier. The ideological demands of the state conflicted with the need reclaim the trauma through narration, instead substituting the reestablishment of an approved subjectivity. Moreover, the discursive presence of the traumatized soldier necessarily constituted either a rebuke to the collective myth of combat masculinity or a sign of individual failure. The war writers' desire to express the realities of war to an uncomprehending public thus constitutes not only a personal need for healing through narration, but also a refutation of imperial ideologies. Because of this, there is an unavoidable ethical component to the strategies undertaken in representing their experiences. We must ask to what degree a given method provides cover not only for the sufferer of trauma, but to the forces and events that give rise to trauma itself. Does the fantastic perpetuate the conditions of silence by obscuring the practical and material

[285] Braudy, 392.

realities at the root of trauma? Questions like this are implicit in accusations of nostalgia that have historically been leveled against Tolkien's fictionalized mythic past. Can we assert that Tolkien (and the fantasy genre by extension) both interprets historical trauma, and avoids complicity in the forces that catalyzed that trauma? We will find that the public and private dimensions of the war writers' dilemma frequently contradict one another. The writers employ strategies that attempt to negotiate between these demands, with varying success. The texts they produced often reflect the inability to completely reconcile these conflicting priorities.

"For God's sake burn my diary": War Stories and Disavowal

The delicate balancing act between expression and silence shaped the ways that the war memoirists presented themselves and the ways that they rendered their experiences within their accounts. An extreme manifestation of this dilemma is visible in a passage from Robert Graves's *Good-Bye to All That*. The officer who preceded Smith – Graves's second sergeant – is convinced that he will die in the next day's battle. In preparation the night before, he makes the following request of Smith:

> see that my kit goes back to my people. You'll find their address in my pocket-book. You'll find five hundred francs there too … you keep a hundred francs yourself and divide up the rest among the chaps left … Send my pocket-book back with my other stuff … but for God's sake burn my diary. They mustn't see that.[286]

Mingled among practical instructions on what to do with his possessions is the particularly urgent injunction to burn the soldier's diary. In fact, this seems to be his most

[286] Graves, 119.

pressing concern, because it poses the threat that someone (in this case, his family) will read it. This raises the question: why keep a diary at all? The existence of a diary after all creates the potential that it will be read and the events that it records communicated. If the diary's contents are too shocking or shameful to share, one might reasonably conclude that they would be better kept to himself, unwritten. This assumes, however, that the contents serve only a social, communicative purpose. The diary fulfills the need for narrativization by allowing the soldier to tell his story to himself. It is a medium of antisocial communication – spoken to no one, but recorded in an empty book, destined for annihilation. In this way, the diary accommodates the competing demands laid on the traumatized. It allows the soldier to claim and control his experience by representing it in language, while simultaneously distancing himself from it through concealment, thereby evading the stigma associated with trauma. The diary is the mechanism by which Smith's predecessor simultaneously reveals and conceals the reality of war.

The war memoirists faced a more complicated dilemma: though under the same demands of truth and secrecy, the public nature of memoir precluded literal concealment of their narratives (whether through destruction or silence). The genre after all elevates factuality not only as earnest recollection, but as a direct opposition to concealment. Evelyn Cobley argues that the memoir constitutes an act of recollection that "implies accuracy in the depiction of events; the writer wants to recall and reproduce as honestly as possible what he has witnessed."[287] The memoir reveals to the public that which was previously known only to the individual. By doing so, it simultaneously lays personal claim on the events narrated; it is through the authority of personal experience that the

[287] Cobley, 8.

veracity of the memoir is maintained. The war memoirs thus embody the dilemma suffered by soldiers as survivors of trauma by publicly claiming trauma through the act of narrativization. Consequently, despite this implicit claim of factuality, many of the war writers practiced strategies designed to conceal or disavow the reality of the experience even as they sought to communicate it. These frequently take the form of layers of fictionalization that are applied to the texts. Such tactics have the effect of distancing the author from the content of the text and the implied stigma of laying claim to the events. They invest an element of deniability even into texts that rely on veracity.

Broadly speaking, these tactics function by exploiting the ambiguity generated by fictionalization. Although the chosen tactics vary in their complexity, each creates the potential for imaginative separation between the memoirist and the memoir. In his introduction to the published text of *Good-Bye to All That*, Paul Fussell suggests that the war writers as a group were engaged in "[blurring] the line formerly distinguishing fiction from nonfiction."[288] The simplest is Max Plowman's use of the name Mark VII for the initial publication of *A Subaltern on the Somme*. The pseudonym creates a literal, albeit superficial, separation between the actual Max Plowman, in the character of a fictional author. This figure lays claim to the events of the memoir, effectively adding a layer of fictionalization to the narrative itself; Plowman remains safely anonymous. A similar impulse is detectable in Graves's *Good-Bye to All That*. Graves famously extolled the virtues of factual representation when it came to the front. Chided by Siegfried Sassoon that "war should not be written about in such a realistic way," Graves replies "in [his] old-soldier manner, that he [will] soon change his style," reminding himself that

[288] Graves, vi.

Sassoon "[has] not yet been in the trenches."[289] Graves sought to reproduce the realities of the war for a largely-ignorant public readership. This was not, however, his first impulse. His earliest account of the war was written while recovering in Harlech from wounds suffered on the Somme; this earliest version was written as fiction. Graves describes "having stupidly written it as a novel," having now "to re-translate it into history."[290] The choice implies a rejection the artifice associated with fictional narrative in favor of a more objectively accurate recounting of events.[291] Regardless, the published version of *Good-Bye to All That* employs the tropes and conventions of various fictional practices, ranging from satire to melodrama and even ghost stories throughout. Graves furthermore acknowledges selecting and emphasizing events that he perceives the reading public to desire.[292] Having ostensibly disavowed the impulse toward fictionalization, Graves nonetheless persists in deploying its organizing strategies to construct his wartime narrative.

These strategies, however, are not innocent, particularly in the context of war. Their use is curious for a group of writers broadly dedicated to delivering a factual account of the war to a public they viewed as ignorant, due to the propaganda on the home front. As Evelyn Cobley reminds us, fictional conventions inflect the way that readers acquire and interpret the information contained in the text:

> tropes both manifest and conceal history, without allowing the reader to either collapse reality and text into each other or to overcome their opposition dialectically. Attempts to reproduce the front-line experience of

[289] Graves, 175.
[290] Graves, 91.
[291] Even among the war memoirists, Graves has a reputation for veracity. Evelyn Cobley cites consensus on this point between scholars J. M Cohen and Robert Canary. (29)
[292] Graves, viii.

> the First World War reveal that tropes construct the event in certain specific ways.[293]

The presence of fictional practices as organizing principles obscure precise nature and location of the reality gestured toward by the text. Cobley argues that, in an attempt to counteract this, many war writers emphasize descriptive language over narrative, in order "to create an illusion of reality."[294] Descriptive discourse appears to avoid the interpretive dominance that Paul Ricoeur describes as the "faculty of mediation, which [conducts] us from the one side of the text to the other, transfiguring the one side into the other through its power of configuration."[295] In contrast to narrative, descriptive discourse appears not to have been organized with the goal of lending order and causality to the events it relates, and thus seems not to have been designed to facilitate particular conclusions about them. However, both the process of selection that underlies descriptive language, and the challenges that emerged from a lack of available descriptive referents that were discussed in the previous chapter, mean that description shapes interpretation in ways less visible but no less powerful than narrative. If description operates by invoking memory of things the reader already knows, the choice of what to invoke necessarily shapes the meaning of the text. Even apparently objective literary practice thus shapes interpretation precisely by its claim to objectivity.

Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of George Sherston* illustrates the dilemma of a soldier attempting to lay overt claim to his traumatic experiences. Rather than rather than simply employing novelistic practices as Graves does, Sassoon maintains a fictionalized distance from the events of the text, which persists in the published form. The memoir

[293] Cobley, 21.
[294] Cobley, 30.
[295] Ricoeur, 53.

explicitly fictionalizes Siegfried Sassoon's life – from fox hunting in the English countryside, to the anti-war letter that ultimately led him to enter intense psychiatric care – by replacing the figure of Sassoon with the fictional George Sherston. The primary distinction between Sassoon and the eponymous main character is that Sherston shows none of Sassoon's inclination toward poetry or creative writing.[296] The text, however, is presented as an autobiography; the only other change appears to be the names of characters. The reading public was generally aware that the experiences portrayed were Sassoon's. His publication of an explicitly pacifist letter titled "A Soldier's Declaration" had drawn national attention in 1917. The same letter serves as the climax to the memoir's second volume, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*. Despite the public knowledge of his affiliation, the fictionalization of the text creates and sustains a degree of distance between Sassoon and Sherston. That the trait Sassoon chooses to withhold is the practice of writing emphasizes this distance, because it is the trait that enables Sassoon to produce the *Memoirs* to begin with. By distinguishing Sherston from himself in this way, Sassoon calls the authorship of the (fictional) text into question. *The Memoirs of George Sherston* are written as memoir throughout, complete with a consistent first-person perspective, and covering roughly the first twenty-five years of Sherston's life. And yet, within the narrative, the text is attributed to a character whose chief distinction from the author is that he has no apparent inclination to write. The creates two possible relationships between the imagined narrator and the author. In the first, Sherston, despite appearances,

[296] To the degree that Sassoon's/Sherston's character is concerned, this remains true. An objection might be raised that other details of Sassoon's life were altered. For example, Sherston's parents died very young; this is not true of Sassoon. To all appearances, however, Sherston's 'Aunt Evelyn' fulfills a similar enough role that some might consider the difference roughly equivalent to a name change. The broader point is the same: Sassoon's memoirs are fictionalized to the degree that they create a distinction between the two men, regardless of whether that distinction enacts a meaningful difference.

has resolved to tell his own story, in which case Sassoon inhabits the imaginative role of Sherston's biographer. Or, Sassoon is creating the story of Sherston, in which the first-person perspective constitutes a fictional invention. Each prevents a direct identification of Sassoon with Sherston by injecting the narrative with an element of fiction. The text thus maintains a distance between Sassoon's experience on the front and the account received by the reader, however factually accurate it might otherwise be.

Sherston's Progress, the final volume of the memoir, demonstrates the effectiveness with which public institutions compelled silence from traumatized soldiers. Following the publication of "A Soldier's Declaration," Robert Graves had Sassoon placed into psychiatric care under W. H. R. Rivers, fearing that the alternative was a court martial. The approach taken by Rivers was far less punitive than that of many other therapists at the time. Unlike contemporaries such as Lewis Yealland, Rivers refused to treat shell-shock as a character flaw deserving shame. Instead, he practiced what he called a "talking cure."[297] This approach is not unlike contemporary ideas of therapy. Rivers represented an alternative to public disgrace in an environment where women "publicly mocked noncombatant males by handing them white feathers on the street."[298] The reader has seen Sherston encounter this attitude as a publicly known pacifist in wartime London. These range from a barfly who remarks that pacifists "are worse than Germans," to civilians who explain that they "are better able to judge the War as a whole than … soldiers."[299] This is institutionalized by the war office, according to whom

[297] Herman, 22.
[298] Braudy, 375.
[299] Sassoon, Siegfried. *Sherston's Progress: The Memoirs of George Sherston*, (New York: Penguin, 1983), 16, 11.

Sherston as "either wounded or well unless he [has] some authorized disease."[300] There is precious little sympathy for the experience of the traumatized or disillusioned soldier. This is at the core of the text's admiration of Rivers. Nonetheless, the Rivers of the text does not offer an escape from the discursive force that silenced open critique of the drive to war.

Although Rivers is presented as relief from the contempt of the public, he nonetheless constitutes a component of the apparatus that facilitates the flow of young men to the front. Rivers himself was an avid supporter of the war; the Rivers of the text shares this trait. He is sympathetic and works to help Sherston recover from his shell-shock (as the real Rivers did for Sassoon). But his practical goal is not to heal Sherston's trauma, but to enable his return to active duty.[301] Relieving Sherston of the need to return to the front – the experience that gave rise to his condition – is not a possibility. The clinic works toward recovery, but "recovery" here refers to the patient's acceptance of those logics that sustain public support for the war effort. With the legitimacy of medical practice, Rivers's treatment operates under the fundamental assumption that Sherston's pacifism is inherently misguided – that it is a pathology, symptomatic of the psychological trauma he suffered on the front. In Sherston's account of therapy sessions, Rivers's expertise frequently delegitimizes Sherston's objection to the war as a valid response: "Sometimes [Rivers] gently indicated inconsistencies in my impulsively expressed opinions, but he never contradicted me. Of course, the weak point about my 'protest' was that it was evoked by personal feeling."[302] Even this – the most positive and

[300] *Sherston's Progress*, 9.
[301] Herman points out that, in this Rivers shares the goal of all military medicine. (21)
[302] *Sherston's Progress*, 7.

sympathetic official response to the traumatized soldiers – ultimately reinforces the discourses that sustain and justify the war effort. Rivers performs the role of sympathetic therapist, but the authority of his position permits him to critique Sherston's arguments while still fulfilling the role of healer. He does so in the language of rationalism, pointing out "inconsistencies" through institutionally-authorized logic and legitimacy.

Curiously then, we have a situation in which a therapist, ostensibly concerned with Sherston's emotional wellbeing, is working to delegitimize his response, precisely because it is based in emotion. Rivers goes so far as to uphold the war on patriotic, and borderline jingoistic grounds, arguing that "peace at that time would constitute a victory for Pan-Germanism and nullify all the sacrifices we had made."[303] This position relies on the assumption of the sacrificial value of those lives lost thus far. Such a belief is more akin to the propaganda dispensed on the home front than to soldiers' accounts of mechanized carnage.[304] But Sherston, by way of his respect for and acceptance of Rivers as a sympathetic medical practitioner, begins to accept and internalize these logics. He characterizes his own opinions as "impulsively expressed," and tacitly endorses the idea that their emotional basis is an inherent flaw. At a particularly heightened moment in his treatment, this sense of inferiority produces intense self-inflicted shame without explicit critique from Rivers:

> … when the pros and cons had got me well out of my depth as a debater, I exclaimed, 'It doesn't seem to me to matter much what one does, so long as one believes it is right!' In the silence that ensued, I was aware that I had said something particularly fatuous.[305]

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[303] *Sherston's Progress*, 7.
[304] Allen Frantzen's *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* argues that the chivalric ideal of Christ-like self-sacrifice provided a potent rhetorical force to British propaganda during the First World War. The motif was effectively deployed to justify the previous loss of life as righteous and to encourage other prospective soldiers to honor the dead and follow their example. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
[305] *Sherston's Progress*, 7-8.

Even the most charitable therapeutic practice available is constructed to fulfill the ideological demands of the state. Whatever its other purposes, Sherston's treatment is designed to rebuild an authorized form of subjectivity – the citizen-soldier. Within the context of his "talking cure," Rivers reinforces the rationalist discourse that upholds the war effort and delegitimizes the experiences of the traumatized veteran. Judith Herman argues that "[the] study of war trauma becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the sacrifice of young men in war."[306] Rivers, however, utilizes his position to uphold such practices. Therefore, even such a sympathetic approach as his cannot overcome the reality that there is no discursive framework that can accommodate the validity of Sherston's explicit critique of the war effort. But because it comes in the context of curative medical practice, he internalizes the attendant critique of both his experiences and the convictions that derive from his emotional response.

Perhaps more than any other part of the *Memoirs*, the chapters concerning Rivers display the ambiguous interactions between layers of personal testimony and fictionalization. The account is presented as the process by which Sherston confronts and overcomes his trauma. But the structure obscures the narrator, and in doing so it compromises our ability to draw conclusions about the narrative. In reality, Sassoon is telling the story of himself, telling his story to Rivers. But he is doing so through a textual performance in which Sherston tells his own story, that story being essentially identical to Sassoon's. This is further complicated by narrator-Sherston's recognition that he is engaging in a sort of fictionalization by withholding information. He refers obliquely to two well-known novelists who write him to critique "A Soldier's Declaration." Sherston

[306] Herman, 9.

(or Sassoon?) acknowledges his coyness in an aside to the reader: "(How tantalizing of me to omit their names! But somehow I feel that if I were to put them on the page my neatly contrived little narrative would come sprawling out of its frame.)"[307] The hostility he is seen to encounter helps to contextualize this ill-defined anxiety. Despite being himself fictional, Sherston values the distance between the textual space of his narrative and the concrete consequences of its relationship to the world outside.

The fictionalized dissonance between Sherston and Sassoon intensifies once Sherston has begun to internalize the ideological critique that is so mildly delivered by Dr. Rivers. Though it is perhaps only more explicitly signaled. With increasing frequency, Sherston makes reference to his own choices and exclusions within the text. These references generally reflect anxiety at the prospect of the fiction drawing too near reality, as well as at the potential implications and consequences of such contact. They do not seem to reflect practical or legal concerns: neither Sherston nor Sassoon seems especially concerned, for example, that the authors whose names he omits above would otherwise take action against him for libel. Rather, the anxiety arises in response to a fear that by violating the fictional frame, the narrator relinquishes the protection it affords him. The descriptors used – "neat," "contrived," and "little" – paint a picture of a fictional apparatus that has been constructed with extreme limits as a quarantine of sorts, a discrete barrier to isolate the narrator from the narrative. The perceived security of this barrier is reflected by the narrator's psychological state. As the fictional boundary blurs, the ability of both the reader and narrator to distinguish between Sherston/Sassoon, as well as between the thoughts of the character/the influence of Rivers, is diminished:

[307] *Sherston's Progress*, 5.

> I told myself that I was 'really feeling fairly fresh again.' And I could have sworn that I heard the voice of Rivers say 'Good!' I mention this to show the way my mind works, though I suppose one ought not to put that sort of 'aside' in a book, especially as I am always reminding myself to be ultra-careful to keep my story 'well inside the frame'. But I begin to feel as if I were inside the frame myself, and that being so, I don't see why Rivers shouldn't be inside it too – in more ways than one.[308]

The quoted phrases in the above section suggest the narrator is formulating his internal discourse via language received from Rivers in order to structure his personal narrative. When he chides himself for putting such an "aside" into his book, he enacts an internalized critique derived from genre orthodoxy. The conventions of the memoir conflict with the psychological demands of confronting and narrating trauma. The genre is designed to provide unimpeded access to the experiences of the author: forthright, accurate, and meaningfully organized for the reader. When this threatens the need for secrecy, Sherston attempts to dissemble by emphasizing his health; he is "feeling fairly fresh." The internalized presence of Rivers reassures him, but it violates the genre by interceding between the reader and the events. The narrative frame loses coherence, and the line between Sherston and Sassoon blurs. The narrator himself is "inside the frame." At this point, however, it is difficult to say whether this is an admission of Sherston or Sassoon.

Sherston is not Sassoon, or at least it is difficult to declare with certainty to what degree Sherston is Sassoon. Thus, there are three ways to read the above passage. First, as I have done, we might read the voice as that of Sherston, fictional memoirist, commenting on his own (fictional) writing process, isolated from that of Sassoon. In this case, the acknowledgement of anxiety stemming from trauma belongs to Sherston alone; the degree to which it imitates Sassoon's experience is indeterminable. Second, we can

[308] *Sherston's Progress*, 31.

read Sherston as a near-literal stand-in for Sassoon. If we read Sherston as an avatar of Sassoon himself, the passage is a narrativization of experiences and anxiety that Sassoon suffers or suffered in the act of writing, but has chosen to attribute to Sherston. In this case, the acknowledgement is Sassoon's, but it operates between a fictionalized barrier that prevents direct identification and lends deniability. Third, we can read the voice as that of Sassoon himself, intruding into his fictionalized narrative. Here, Sherston himself is the "frame" to which the narrator refers. By revealing himself to the reader, Sasson acknowledges the flimsiness of the fiction he has constructed – exacerbated, perhaps, because in making Sherston a fictional memoirist, Sassoon has made him a writer and thus undermined the primary distinction he sought to place between them. In this case, the acknowledgement is genuine; the sensations and anxieties being claimed are Sassooned, experienced at the moment of writing. The indeterminacy of the speaker's identity in this moment enables Sassoon to present the anxieties of the traumatized author seeking to express his disrupted sense of self to the reader, without definitively laying claim to his own trauma.

Clearly, there is an urge, visible in many writings of the war, to resist direct personal identification with the realities of the experiences written, despite the value they placed on fidelity to truth.[309] Often the fictionalizing tactics employed by authors to achieve this separation brought the narrative into tension with its ostensible genre. Genre is, among other things, one of the sets of codes with which we delineate realistic and non-realistic narrative. To convey the reality of the war to a largely ignorant public, the war

[309] Evelyn Cobley identifies a variety of writers whose works on the Great War blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction. Beyond those discussed here, she includes Blunden, Barbusse, Harrison, Manning, and others. She identifies their works as, variously, fictitious memoir, diary/novel, fictive autobiography, and novels grounded in autobiographical experience. (11).

writers were obligated to participate in genres, like memoir, that signaled authenticity to the reader. But it is precisely this authenticity that threatens the authors by requiring them to lay explicit claim to those traumatic experiences which upended their sense of shared reality with their readership and thus stigmatized them. The logic of mimetic literary codes like non-fiction genres is predicated on the knowability of events, but the events of the front violated the epistemological and ideological frameworks that made war knowable. This was the source of the stigma visited on those who experienced them. As a result, many of the authors employed a strategy that intermingled fiction with non-fiction genres, facilitating expression while maintaining a kind of silence.

This is not simply a defensive act, however; some degree of fictionalization was a necessary component for soldiers to tell their stories at all. The indeterminacy of fiction is inherent to the experience as their first-hand accounts. Indeed, Evelyn Cobley argues that the war memoirs illustrate Derrida's contention that the dichotomy of remembering and forgetting is inherent in the idea of the memoir.[310] The distortion of the experience is as much a part of the story as names, dates, and places (all of which are themselves obscured at times by the authors under consideration). Though the genre claims its authority through first-hand experience, it represents not the experience itself, but the memory of it. In the case of the war memoirs, this remembrance often reached back across a significant period of time. They are therefore subject to the problems of memory: the slippages and uncertainties, the taxonomies and associations that are bound to them in order to render meaning from them – to integrate them, as Herman says, into the story of one's life.[311] These distortions act on events almost as soon as they enter into memory;

[310] Cobley, 9.
[311] Herman, 175.

how much more prevalent must they be ten years down the line, even more so when acting upon an experience as unfathomable and traumatizing as the first modern war? In fact, according to Graves, the space the war occupies in his memory is a necessarily fictionalized space:

> The memoirs of a man who went through some of the worst experiences of trench warfare are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities. High-explosive barrages will make a temporary liar or visionary of anyone; the old trench-mind is at work in all overestimation of casualties, "unnecessary" dwelling on horrors, mixing of dates, and confusion between trench rumors and scenes actually witnessed.[312]

The fictionalizing practices of the war writers are not merely stylistic choices; rather, they reflect the nature of the war retrospective. The past, already subject to the obscuring effects of memory, is further warped by the otherworldliness of the experience being recalled. These transformations are inseparable from the memory; the fictionalization is as inherent to the experience as the first-hand account. This distortion of memory is what leads war writers like Tolkien beyond ordinary fictionalization into the fantastic.

Memorial and the Fantastic

Ironically, fidelity to the reality of the lived experience of the front demanded the distortion of realistic representation. In this, we begin to see the affinity between trauma and the fantastic. The fantastic, Rosemary Jackson argues, "traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" – precisely the space that traumatic experience inhabits.[313] By its nature, the fantastic enables distortions of reality because it permits an imaginative boldness that is

[312] Graves, vi.
[313] Jackson, 4.

precluded by strictly mimetic literary practice. The value of this to the writer of trauma is the capacity it offers to induce credulity regarding ideas and events outside what is accepted as real. If, as Herman asserts, trauma victims find that their narratives take place outside "socially validated reality," then the fantastic as I have defined it has a natural affinity to such accounts. Recall that Kathryn Hume defines the fantastic as the literary act of departure from consensus reality.[314] Where the fictionalizing techniques discussed above obscure precise conditions, the fantastic sets aside the question of reality entirely. But this is a discursive function only; the "real" is the implicit category against which the fantastic implicitly operates, and whose bounds it interrogates. Because of this, the fantastic occupies an imaginative space in which ideological sureties – which respond to the disruptive effects of trauma by stigmatizing the traumatized – are not threatened and thus can be questioned and even reconfigured freely. By operating outside of the bounds of ideological authority, the fantastic challenges its definitional totality. Categories like genre that enforce standards of reality are undermined by the fantastic, thereby reminding the reader how much such categories rely on modes of perception.[315] The fantastic constitutes a literary space in which such certainties can be called into question precisely because it assumes a departure from reality. It illustrates the ways in which the categories "real" and "unreal" are mutually-constitutive, rather than stable structures grounded in rationalist certainty.

Even more than simple fictionalization within a realistic context, the fantastic suited the interpretive needs of remembering and redressing the war – both because it helped to shield the writer from scrutiny so often inflicted on trauma survivors and

[314] Hume, xii.
[315] Sullivan and White, 6.

because it reflected the distortions with which they were obliged to recall its events. In both cases, the operative feature is the fantastic's ability to delve into and depict the evidently unreal. This grants the capacity for "rehearsal of alternative scenarios from a position of safety, allowing them to be developed before being effected."[316] The fantastic is permitted to recombine and reconfigure the world in ways contrary to understood reality because it operates under the auspices of "what if?" Tolkien himself famously used the image of a green sun to illustrate the capacity of the fantastic to reconfigure elements of the world without triggering incredulity.[317] Critics have often interpreted this as a means of wish-fulfillment. In *Writing and Fantasy*, for example, Ceri Sullivan and Barbara White argue that the fantastic signifies "a deliberate response to a gap between the real and desired, under the control of the individual."[318] Rosemary Jackson similarly refers to the fantastic as "a literature of desire," arguing that it "seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss."[319] But the works under consideration here do not merely portray a desired reality. This perspective is aligned with those who see the fantastic as fundamentally escapist – as "the Flight of the Deserter," rather than "the Escape of the Prisoner."[320] Likewise, it invites another reading that dismisses Tolkien as fundamentally nostalgic. Rather, these texts utilize the fantastic as a tool to reconfigure reality in an attempt to render meaning from events that defy interpretation under the auspices of reality.

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[316] Sullivan and White, 5.
[317] *The Monsters and the Critics*, 140.
[318] Sullivan and White, 3.
[319] Jackson, 3.
[320] *The Monsters and the Critics*, 148.

Because it can reconfigure reality in this way, the fantastic is a means to make traumatic loss comprehensible and thus instructive. It is because of this that I describe the modern fantastic as an aesthetic of mourning. The capacity the fantastic offers to repair the damage done by trauma is the capacity to rebuild connections in new configurations when prior certainties collapse and possibility defies the necessary reordering. It does not attempt to recreate or reclaim "that which is experienced as absence and loss." Rather, it renders meaning from the absence. George Johnson argues that the contemporary resurgence in popular mysticism and fascination with ghostliness filled a similar role for the British populace, by facilitating mourning and enabling recovery. Taking a deliberately sympathetic position, Johnson finds that "the attraction to mysticism … made perfect sense within a culture of mourning, of large-scale loss and bereavement … particularly during the First World War."[321] Mysticism, as a fundamentally irrational set of practices, provided a means to navigate and confront tragedies that defied rational comprehension. Imaginative activity like writing – particularly fiction writing – likewise serves a special function in the context of overwhelming and traumatic loss:

> Writers can develop the capacity to renegotiate severed or damaged attachments in the imagination … [They] have the facility to manipulate imagery and symbol in order to manage anxiety by shifting it into fictional situations and in some cases onto fictionalized characters within the ordered form of a [written work].[322]

If fiction permits the sufferer of trauma to re-narrate the world from a position of safety, the fantastic – that is the purely, explicitly imaginative – enables them to "renegotiate severed or damaged attachments" and organize them into new, beneficial configurations. The fantastic offers the opportunity to recover impossibly from in the face of seemingly

[321] Johnson, 3.
[322] Johnson, 11.

irrecoverable loss. We must emphasize – opportunity, not guarantee. This argument does not posit the fantastic as a panacea for large-scale trauma. Rather, on the civilizational scale, the remove provided be the fantastic is sometimes necessary in order to confront trauma *at all*.

Trauma tends to distinguish itself by its inexplicable and persistent presence, where regular experiences confine themselves neatly to the past. The supernatural tends to appear in association with this sort of mourning because of its capacity to signify the unknowable and that which does not conform to rationalist epistemologies. For the author and the mourner both, the intrusion of the supernatural is a symbolic manifestation of what Cathy Caruth calls "the impact of [traumatic violence's] very incomprehensibility … the reality of the way violence has not yet been fully known."[323] This is both symptom and source of trauma's status as "a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness."[324] Like trauma, the supernatural disrupts by surfacing where it is neither expected nor welcome. We have seen the frequency with which the front is represented by memoirists as a ghastly, haunting otherworld; this ghostliness similarly invokes the persistence of memories of large-scale slaughter. Colin Davis argues that ghosts in particular enact their own type of knowability that replaces "the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive." This irreconcilability is what lends the ghost its fantastic potency as a presence that defies rational insistence on its impossibility. To haunt is to be "a wholly irrecuperable intrusion in our world,

[323] Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 6.
[324] Caruth, 6.

which is not comprehensible within available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving."[325] The haunted landscape is unique in its ability to represent a world defined by immense loss, shaped by the distorted lens of distant memory. It is a past that haunts the present with its persistent, unforgettable intrusion on the mind, and in this way continues to exist despite its long absence. It signifies the lingering effect of events that cannot be thought to have happened, a space that cannot be thought to have existed, and yet did.

Ghosts and ghostly figures haunt Tolkien's well-known works (perhaps most explicitly in the "Fog on the Barrow-downs" chapter of *Fellowship*), but throughout his work, the landscape itself constitutes a haunting presence. This is frequently visible in the ruins that litter the landscape of Middle-Earth, evoking their own destruction like the Albert Basilica in wartime France. However, its operation is most clearly visible in the epilogue of *The Children of Hurin*. This text, whose earlier version, "Turambar and the Foalókë," was discussed in the previous chapter, was composed around 1930 and a contemporaneous abridged version published in 1977 as part of *The Silmarillion*.[326] *The Silmarillion* names the tale "The Tale of Grief, for it is sorrowful, and in it are revealed most evil works of Morgoth Bauglir."[327] The epitaph is appropriate: the narrative is structured around a series of traumatic losses that shape the life of its protagonist, often through his own violent reactions to them. The chain of events culminates in the suicides

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[325] Davis, 9.

[326] I draw from both published versions in this discussion. Given their contemporaneous composition, and the fact that each fulfilled a different textual role, I take them broadly to represent a single conception of the narrative. Christopher Tolkien apparently believed the same, utilizing the shortened version to fill in gaps in the longer during his editing process.
Tolkien, J. R. R. *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 6.

[327] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Silmarillion*, 2nd Ed, ed. Christopher Tolkien. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 199.

of both Turin and his sister, Nienor. His father, Hurin, is held captive and magically forced to watch the entirety of his son's tragic life; he is freed only after his children have died.

Much as Graves's second sergeant and his burned diary created the condition of unknowable silence that led many British civilians to explore mysticism as a means to mourning, Hurin's refusal to speak of the tragedy he has witnessed haunts the place of his children's death. Following his release, Hurin makes his way to their grave site. There he finds Morwen, the mother of Turn and Nienor, sitting against the stone. Only Hurin knows the tragic details of their children's story; Morwen knows simply that they are dead. Near death herself, she asks Hurin to tell he what happened to their children. Burdened by the weight of his grief, and the tragedy that he has witnessed, which compounds the loss by tainting its memory, Hurin cannot or will not answer. Turin and Nienor are thus alienated from their mother by the unspeakability and unknowability of the traumas that comprise their story. Through the irreconcilability of this alienation, they become a source of Morwen's own trauma. Morwen dies soon after, and Hurin buries her in the same spot. The memorial stone that marks all three persists long after:

> he made a grave for Morwen … on the west side of the stone; and upon it he cut these words: *Here Lies Also Morwen Eledhwen.*
> It is told … that the Stone of the Hapless should not be defiled by Morgoth, nor ever thrown down, not though the sea should drown all the land; as indeed after befell, and still Tol Morwen stands alone in the water beyond the new coasts that were made in the days of the wrath of the Valar.[328]

Tol Morwen's fantastic properties are a product of its roots in a narrative of mourning. It signifies not one but three tragic losses, and the point at which they became irretrievable.

[328] *The Silmarillion*, 229-30.

The island that it becomes haunts Middle-Earth through its persistent presence in combination with its inaccessibility. Even as the landscape around it is remade, the monument impossibly remains to commemorate the loss. But it is remote; standing "alone in the water beyond the new coasts." Like a ghost, it persists beyond the point when it should have been consigned to the past, and in doing so it mimics the effects of trauma. Turin, Nienor, and Morwen haunt the landscape less by their deaths than by the unspeakability and inaccessibility of the space that they leave behind. The hill and its name testify to their existence, invoking their past in the present, but as time passes, only a few can remember the meaning of either.

Middle-Earth is largely defined by its tendency to accumulate spaces like Tol-Morwen, spaces that represent the disintegration imposed by trauma. Ruins and memorials are frequent subjects of attention throughout the texts. By the time of *The Lord of the Rings*, nearly every space evokes an event of loss. These places, and their accumulation across the entirety of Middle-Earth, constitute what Jay Winter calls "sites of memory." This term describes artifacts and spaces that testify to the nature of a catastrophic experience, and "the multifaceted effort of survivors to understand what [has] happened."[329] *The Lord of the Rings* famously features – among others – the sepulchral Mines of Moria, the Dead Marshes, and the fallen capital city of Osgiliath. The expansive history of mourning that exists beneath the narrative surfaces only in ruins and through haunting glimpses – what John Marino calls "a shadow that lingers on the periphery of the setting."[330] These spaces are determined more by what they used to be

[329] Winter, 7.
[330] Marino, John. "The Presence of the Past in *The Lord of the Rings*." *Tolkien in the New Century: Essays in Honor of Tom Shippey*. Ed. John Wm. Houghton, Janet Brennan Croft, Nancy Martsch, John D. Rateliff, Robin Anne Reid. (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2014), 169.

than by what they are. They signify the emptiness left in the wake of past loss. The memorial function of these locations is evident in the frequency with which characters respond by telling the story of the lost people and places whose absence they represent. *The Book of Lost Tales* can be interpreted as an extended representation of this exchange. The tales amount to a single, immense narrative, presented as explanation for the absence of Beleriand – the destroyed elven lands memorialized by the island of Tol Eressëa.

The loss signified by these memorials is compounded by forgetting. Forgetting intensifies loss by making it irrevocable. In forgetting, we lose access to the associations that point to our gap in knowledge and conjure the disruptive effects of haunting. Mourning becomes an impossibility, relying as it does on the recurrence of loss via memory. If *The Book of Lost Tales* is a fictional representation of memorialization, its prospective conclusion associates catastrophe with this sort of forgetfulness. A scene of war is presented as a moment of loss and despair in the aftermath of violence, leaving emptiness behind: "now sorrow and [?] has come upon the Elves … all are fled, fearing the enemy … whose hands are red with the blood of Elves and stained with the lives of his own kin."[331] The driving-out of the elves mimics the disruptive effect of traumatic violence as an alienation from one's own past. Their presence constitutes a continuity in which the past remains meaningful; their absence is both symptom and symbol of a traumatized world that has lost this connection. The consequences of this type of loss are emphasized in a later passage that mourns this loss:

> Who are the fairies … Memories faded dim, a wraith of vanishing loveliness in the trees, a rustle of grass, a glint of dew, some subtle intonation in the wind …

[331] *BoLT 2*, 293.

> But behold, Tavrobel shall not know its name, and all the land be changed, and even this written words of mine believe will all be lost; and so I lay down the pen, and so of the fairies cease to tell.[332]

This passage conforms to Cathy Caruth's definition of a history of trauma as a history that is "referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs;" – that it "can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence."[333] The fairies here are represented precisely by the emptiness they leave; they are reminders of a loss, interpretable only through the pain of loss. The fairies have disappeared not only materially, but epistemologically. They are perceptible only through natural phenomena that have been made uninterpretable by a lack of access to the knowledge necessary for understanding. In this way, their loss has become irrevocable.

Losing the meaning of a shared past leads to the forgetting of oneself: we are told that"Tavrobel shall not know its [own] name." A loss of the self is the ultimate consequence of unreconciled disconnection from the past that results from trauma inflicted by mass violence. This is because it negates the possibility of self-recognition – a necessary precondition for the narration of one's life. In forgetting one's own past, it becomes unknowable and therefore incommunicable, either to oneself or others. Truly forgetting oneself, relinquishing all continuity between the past and present, thus renders recovery impossible. The command given to Graves's by second sergeant thus indicates his despair of this possibility. To burn his diary, consigning the recollections and truths it contains to oblivion, renders his experience permanently incommunicable. It likewise ensures that he will remain unknowable; his family retains an imaginative version of him which includes none of the experiences that so changed him. The sergeant anticipates his

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[332] *BoLT 2*, 294. 'Tavrobel' is the name of the elven capital in early drafts.
[333] Caruth, 18.

family's material loss with his epistemological obliteration. By abandoning his narrative, Tolkien's narrator similarly surrenders to forgetfulness and unknowability; he ceases to (re)construct the history of the fairies. As it relates to the time of its composition, however, this finale is not anticipatory but reflective. Tavrobel is a literal representation of pre-historic Staffordshire. For a contemporary audience, therefore, the implication is that Travrobel has already forgotten herself. The story has already become unknowable, severing those links to the past that permit the people of England to recognize themselves. This surrender thus signifies a contemporary despair of England's capacity to ever know itself again in the wake of mass violence, both on the page and on the front.

Middle-Earth's memorial logic anticipates what we now refer to as cultural memory. Emerging in the late 1980s, cultural memory studies examine "the symbolic order … practices by which social groups construct a shared past."[334] In much the same way that the logic of trauma was used synecdochally to relate the state of post-war English society to the psychological condition of the individual, cultural memory inhabits an essentially metaphorical relationship to individual memory. As Astrid Erll tells us, "much of what is done [by societies] to reconstruct a shared past bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory." This includes "the selectivity and perspectivity inherent in the creation of versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs."[335] Cultural memory operates in part through the textual interrelation of signs and the significance a given culture applies to these relationships. Literature, with its capacity to manipulate these relationships, occupies a unique position in the context of cultural

[334] Erll, Astrid. "Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Disciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 5.
[335] Astrid, 5.

memory. According to Brigit Neuman, because of the "specific referentiality of literary works – that is, cultural preformation on one hand and possibilities of imaginative formation on the other hand – a study of fictional representations of memory yields insight … into both sanctioned and unsanctioned memories."[336] Fictional literature is capable both of participating in a culture's memorial practices, and exploring as well as expanding the boundaries of those same practices. If, as Jay Winter contends, in the aftermath of the Great War, "older motifs took on new meanings and new forms," the relationships on which cultural interpretation and thus cultural memory depended were disrupted and violently reconfigured.[337] The effects of mass violence on a society can thus correspond to those of personal trauma by fracturing agreed-upon codes of cultural signification. This makes possible the dissolution of cultural memory, perceived as a collective break with the past, as occurs when Tavrobel forgets its own name.

Tolkien's fantastic history is deliberately constructed not from concrete historical knowledge, but from the remnants of such disintegrated systems of cultural signification. Its distorted and fantastic qualities haunt the modern reader by conjuring the possibility of unknowable pasts that cannot be rationally accessed. Tolkien locates Middle-Earth in what Tom Shippey refers to as an "asterisk-reality," imaginatively inferred from the gaps in knowledge of ancient languages.[338] Linguistic constructions whose underlying referents are inaccessible imply the prior existence of consonant terms whose meaning although unknowable is suggestive. Thus, they tantalize and invite speculation. In many

[336] Neuman, Brigit. "The Literary Representation of Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Disciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 335.
[337] Winter, 5.
[338] *The Road to Middle-Earth*, 19.

instances, this is the vehicle by which Tolkien gains imaginative access to historical alterity. As Cathy Caruth's theorizes of histories of trauma, it is "no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference)."[339] Tolkien's history is imbricated in the systems that comprise cultural memory, which make it accessible but also misleading and prone to distortion. It simulates the destructive effects of forgetting by imaginatively locating the reader in a world that has already forgotten. That Tolkien identifies the effects of forgotten pasts in modern England reflects the affinities between cultural memory and his academic practice of philology. This method of deriving cultural knowledge from the interstitial gaps in language is commonly associated with the discipline, particularly, as Shippey notes, in "the fastening down of landscape to popular consciousness by the habit of naming places."[340] Although the meanings of placenames are lost over time, they nonetheless exert ownership over the space and those who inhabit it – an ownership that becomes harder to gainsay precisely because we cannot interpret it and therefore cannot dismantle it. In forgetting "Tavrobel," the modern English subject forgets even the remnant of this connection to the past, and has ceased to be haunted by its unknowability.

In this formulation, forgetting is aligned with an end of mourning and with the negative connotations of nostalgia. Remembrance is aligned with haunting, the continuance of mourning, and constructive nostalgia. Each concerns the relationship to the past that we inhabit, as well as the degree to which we recognize the past's role in shaping the present. Likewise they demand we address the question of our responsibility to the past. The first set constructs the past primarily through its opposition to the present.

[339] Caruth, 11.
[340] Shippey, 29.

Uncritical nostalgia, for example constitutes a form of forgetting that replaces memory with an idealized construct that it construes as genuine. A static ideal condemns the present as unworthy, foreclosing the possibility of generative exchange or growth. The past is held to be the betrayed party, above reproach for the creation of the present by which its promise was squandered. The latter set on the other hand, acknowledges the debts owed to the past by the present, for better or worse, and the continued role that each plays in shaping the other. Tolkien utilizes the fantastic as a means to access and explore new configurations by constructing imaginative alternative memories. *The Book of Lost Tales* posits the distorting effects of the fantastic as a defense against the dissolution of cultural memory by generating a fictionalized memorial for an imaginative forgotten past. But to do so it utilizes the lacunae within ancient cultural memory to posit a rationally impossible world. In the context of modernism and the war in particular, this has the troubling potential to efface genuine contemporary suffering in much the way nostalgia effaces the past. The question, then, is which of these possible interactions with the past does *The Book of Lost Tales* undertake?

Ethics of the Fantastic in War

If Tolkien's fiction portrays a world that is defined through representations of mourning, it also implies an aesthetic dimension to its portrayal of mourning by virtue of its elevated romantic language. Particularly in the context of the Great War, this sort of aestheticization tends to trouble modern critics, and with good reason. As John Su points out, in an argument centered on the significance of aesthetics in colonial texts, literary

scholars have long understood modern European aesthetics, developed during the Enlightenment, to be "intimately linked to the intellectual and ideological justifications for worldwide colonial expansion." In the context of colonial literature, privileging aesthetics threatens to conceal the political realities afflicting the colonized behind "a universalizing, Enlightenment discourse."[341] The aesthetic quality of Tolkien's writing similarly risks aligning the work with the social and political forces of imperialism that motivated the war effort. This is especially damning if the aesthetics with which the text invests mourning recognizably glorify the loss of life that precipitated it. The question we must answer is whether, and to what degree, Tolkien's aesthetics avoid what Tammy Clewell describes as "the anesthetizing potential of the aesthetic" – the tendency toward unjustified consolation and comfort that lends support to imperial ideologies by "[facilitating] the forgetting of lost others and lost histories by insisting on closure."[342] Can an artistic project such as Tolkien's address the past in this way without silencing its disruptive lessons and serving the purposes of its destructive ideologies?

The content and imagery of medievalism and heroic romance is particularly fraught in this context because of its prevalent role in British war propaganda. Throughout the war, the medieval world was utilized by the British government not only to sanitize the image of warfare, but to suggest a unifying national history for which hundreds of thousands of young British men were dying. In *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War*, Allen Frantzen examines the role played by the chivalric ideal in contemporary British war promotions, as well as war memorials. Frantzen argues that the idea of heroic sacrifice took on special significance, particularly Christ-like self-

[341] Su, John. *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel*. (New York: Cambridge UP, 2011), 126.
[342] Clewell, Tammy. *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 3.

sacrifice. He argues that self-sacrifice blurs the lines between martial sacrifice of one's enemy and the piety of anti-sacrifice, which opposed the taking of life.[343] We are reminded of the terms in which Dr. Rivers refutes Sherston's prospective pacifism – that to withdraw early would "nullify all the sacrifices [Britain] had made."[344] The trappings of chivalric romance invested the war with moral weight and established combat fatalities as fallen heroes whose deaths were justified by their service to the nation.

At the same time, the sanitizing effects of romantic imagery suppressed the impersonal brutality of modern warfare. In contrast to the stark and bloody portrayals of the front found in the writing of the war memoirists, this effect enabled propogandists to present war as a clean, noble undertaking. The prospective soldier was encouraged to take aesthetic pleasure in the idea of joining the fight. Frantzen reproduces a common recruitment poster that portrays St. George's defeat of the dragon, proclaiming "Britain Needs You At Once." He observes that the romanticized elements "conspire to suppress blood and struggle – to say nothing of war – and present the surface of heroic masculinity as a free-floating fantasy." Victory here is achieved without violence: "the dragon appears to have been pierced without force; the knight's horse … seems gracefully airborne."[345] Because it abstracts the war from concrete reality, the fantastic imagery of chivalric romance is able to promote enlistment without reference to the impersonal, mechanized conflict unfolding on the continent. It presents a version of warfare that is entirely without risk or loss. The deceptive qualities of the poster are intensified because, as Frantzen notes, by the time it appeared in 1915, the British government knew that the

[343] Frantzen, 3.
[344] *Sherston's Progress*, 7.
[345] Frantzen, 14.

war would be neither quick nor easy.[346] What might otherwise be excused as an earnest, if misguided, plea to the citizenry is in fact a cynical rhetorical decision, designed to render violence (and likely death) appealing. In the context of the Great War, the language and images of chivalric romance are perhaps inseparable from the dishonesty and opportunism with which they were wielded.

In addition to concealing the violent nature of the war, propaganda of this type distorted and oversimplified the conflict by placing it in continuity with nationalist narratives. The figure of St. George, with his status as England's patron saint, provides a means for the average soldier (and noncombatant civilian) to identify with the nation. As Frantzen points out, George is not only England's patron saint, but "a traditional figure of British patriotism, and an emblem of chivalry and holy warfare."[347] For England, St. George personifies a mythic national past; because he provides a position into which observers can place themselves, contemporary British citizens are able to imagine their role in an unbroken cultural tradition. Through St. George, the British nation is made synonymous with the chivalric associations of romance combat, and simultaneously identified with its young men. Likewise, the dragon occupies the position of the German forces, and invites the observer to imagine the enemy as monolithic – a rhetoric that Fussell identifies as key to discourse surrounding the war effort.[348] The poster is designed to induce the citizen observers to imagine themselves in brave opposition to the German attackers, while at the same time steering their imaginations away from the realities of modern war.

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[346] Frantzen, 15.
[347] Frantzen, 14.
[348] Fussell, 75-77.

After the war, the trappings of romance were utilized in public displays of mourning. In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Jay Winter argues that – far from catalyzing modernist revolutions – the war had the effect of intensifying the general European public's reliance on traditional forms of expression, particularly when it came to mourning. Winter's argument distinguishes between what he views as the elitist aesthetic practices of the high modernists, and the larger population of Europe, which he represents as the mass public response. Like the St. George poster, public commemoration "affirm[s] community … assert[s] its moral character, and … exclude[s] from it those values, groups, or individuals that [place] it under threat."[349] Also like the poster, public mourning drew on the chivalric tradition to convey its message. Memorials frequently participated in "the glorification of sacrifice … [in] deliberately archaic language, the cadences of knights and valour, of quests and spiritualized combat."[350] Memorial sites represent the intersection of state power with personal bereavement. By abstracting the dead into a singular loss, often represented as a collective sacrifice, they reaffirm the nationalist narrative and the state's right to compel its citizens to die. At the same time, however, they are a place in which the bereaved can imaginatively encounter the dead whom they mourn as a personal loss – a physical artifact that attests to the efficacy of mourning.[351] In part this is a consequence of the scope of the war's casualties; the national death toll was immense. Yet because of this, nearly every citizen felt personally the death of some friend or loved one. The aesthetics and logic of chivalric romance allowed national bereavement to be personalized without

[349] Winter, 80.
[350] Winter, 85.
[351] Winter, 94-95.

sacrificing its cultural impact.[352] Winter argues that these localized sites of memory provided points of focus for the individual, providing a means of "passing through mourning, of separating from the dead, and beginning to live again." Indeed, he argues, memorials are an impetus for "forgetting, as much as commemoration, and war memorials … help in the necessary act of forgetting."[353] In this sense, the public practice of mourning adheres to the logic of trauma, enabling the citizens of Europe to locate their loss in the past and move forward with their lives.

It is precisely this forgetting, however, to which many twentieth-century critics find an objection in modernist and post-modernist literature. Patricia Rae has argued that such forgetting is seen to amount to "an abdication of responsibility for, what has been lost … amnesia has been too often demanded and paid in the interests of preserving the *status quo*."[354] In other words, the closure of the mourning process discourages positive action to dismantle those ideologies that motivated the war. Thus, like pro-war propaganda, it is ultimately aligned with the forces that precipitated the war. According to Tammy Clewell, modernists, particularly Woolf and Faulkner, responded by creating a "conception of mourning as an interminable rather than finishable labor [resulting] from a steadfast rejection of all symbolic forms of consolation."[355] This rejection includes a disavowal of "the anesthetizing potential of the aesthetic," reasoning that "consolatory paradigms … both [reinforce] a capitalist status quo and [facilitate] the forgetting of lost others and lost histories by insisting on closure."[356] This perspective interprets the closure

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[352] Frantzen, 197-98.
[353] Winter, 115.
[354] Rae, Patricia. "Introduction: Modernist Mourning," in *Modernism and Mourning*. ed. Patricia Rae. (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2007), 18. Italics in original.
[355] Clewell, Tammy. "Introduction: Rethinking Loss, Remapping the Novel," in *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism*. ed. Tammy Clewell. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 2.
[356] Clewell, 'Rethinking Loss,' 3.

of mourning as an effective refusal to be haunted by the past, which it views as an ethical imperative. The traumas of the past are disavowed and made invisible rather than being recognized and interpreted. Aestheticizing language (of which romance was most often applied to the Great War) is from this perspective primarily a means to conceal unpleasant or violent realities, thus encouraging complacency and discouraging positive action. The consolatory effect of aesthetic production conspires with completed mourning to deny responsibility to victims of past violence. In doing so, they allow the potential for such violence to persist into the future.

Nostalgia, trauma, and romantic aestheticism are interlinked by the ways that each concerns personal and collective relationships to the past, particularly the past as it is shaped by the present, and shapes the present in return. Each represents a distinct, but related, type of memory. If romantic aesthetics portray an idealized version of an inaccessible past, nostalgia and trauma recovery represent different methods of signifying and engaging with a past that is defined by the memory of its loss. Each constitutes what Linda Hutcheon describes an act of "memory and desire … [as well as] forgetting" in the service of imaginatively constructing the past.[357] They are distinguished from one another, therefore, by the ways in which memory and desire determine what is remembered, what is forgotten, and how, as well as the purpose with which they are undertaken: to acknowledge or to suppress the haunting effects of the past on the present. In his examination of Siegfried Sassoon's postwar writing, Robert Hemmings posits that the functions of nostalgia and trauma recovery are essentially oppositional. According to Hemmings, Sassoon's recovery from trauma is undermined by the nostalgic indulgence

[357] Hutcheon, Linda. "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," in *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory*. ed. Raymond Vervliet and Annemarie Estor. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 195.

which "hinders [the] thoroughness" of his "exploration of his past."[358] Nostalgia prevents genuine, earnest reconstruction of the past, which is a necessary step in traumatic recovery, by filling its place with a desirable imaginative substitute. For Hemmings, the prevalence of nostalgia following the Great War reflects the reaction of a society, "invested in a social geography of Englishness to which homecoming was no longer possible," to the incipient decline of the empire.[359] Others, like Stephen Spender, argue that nostalgia has the potential for a positive aspect – one which avoids a purely sentimental and ultimately ineffectual longing for the past, instead using the imaginative past to provide a contrasting position from which to critique the present and ultimately open the possibility of alternative futures.[360]

Any conclusion we draw about the relationship between J. R. R. Tolkien's work and the personal and social traumas of the Great War must to some degree take these question into consideration. The general critical assumption has been that Tolkien's treatment of the past represents the negative side of the equation, aligned with undue consolation, and the silencing of trauma's claim on the present; this is reflected in the accusations of nostalgic indulgence that are frequently leveled against his fiction. The key point of dispute is whether the particular character of the fantastic elements in Tolkien's fiction serves to avoid the traumas of the past, thus denying our responsibility to the victims, or enables meaningful confrontation of the past; whether romanticizing or aestheticizing language can be deployed in the context of the Great War without being

[358] Hemmings, Robert. "Nostalgia, Trauma, and the Aftermath of War: Siegfried Sassoon and W. H. R. Rivers," in *Modernism and Nostalgia: Bodies, Locations, Aesthetics*. ed. Tammy Clewell. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 41.
[359] Hemmings, 51.
[360] Spender, Stephen. *The Struggle of the Modern*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 212.

complicit in its justification. Ted Bogacz, for example, contends in "A Tyranny of Words" that high diction reproduces violent, imperial ideologies not through context, but by its nature. For him, high diction and romanticized imagery are "abstract, euphemized language[s]," whose use, because they are "not rooted in observed reality," inherently "ignore and obfuscate [the writer's] and others' experiences."[361] This was the quality on which British propaganda drew to make the war palatable and retain public support. Can *The Book of Lost Tales* utilize such language without being complicit in its associated ideological practices? Does it indulge in uncritical nostalgia for an imaginative past, or does it, in some more deliberate way, critique the present?

The most radical objections to Tolkien's literary romanticism contend that all aesthetic representation cannot help but support capitalist and imperial ideologies. This view is most famously professed by Theodor Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*. In this influential work, Adorno contends that aesthetic appreciation is an act of misdirection that serves the purposes of capitalist society by distracting the populace from the reality of its social and economic oppression. As a result, it discourages positive action against the status quo of late capitalism. The very act of representing an object for aesthetic satisfaction makes it available for commodification and subversion by capitalist frameworks.[362] This is in some sense a broader application of the modernist objection to the consolatory closure of mourning. In this case, the principle applies to all types of consolation. Or, perhaps more precisely, it identifies in aesthetic pleasure an illusory consolation that fraudulently satisfies the need for genuine resolution. As an alternative,

[361] Bogacz, Ted. "'A Tyranny of Words': Language, Poetry, and Antimodernism in England in the First World War." *The Journal of Modern History* 58, no. 3 (Sept 1986): 649.
[362] Adorno, 13.

Adorno advocates for a modern aesthetic of art that is non-representative. By eliding representation, art refuses to submit its subject to the co-opting forces that seek to turn it into consolatory artifacts, and thus retains its ability to gesture toward new possibilities.

However, arguments such as this underestimate the collective need for consolation, particularly in the context of such immense collective traumas as the Great War. In his conclusion to "Nostalgia, Trauma, and the Aftermath of War," Robert Hemmings describes Sassoon's nostalgia as "a kind of vaccine, a consciously held means of inoculating himself and his readers against the renewal of trauma."[363] The "renewal of trauma," as Cathy Caruth reminds us, can be a perpetual and paralyzing occurrence. Traumatic experience not only reveals itself via its recurrence; the recurrence is the experience. Because of this, it exerts determinative power over the present for those afflicted. In this way, violence and trauma located in the past can manifest as "a sort of face … which [seems] to be entirely outside … wish or control."[364] A case can be made that in the aftermath of catastrophic violence, the denial of consolation can foreclose possibilities as completely as undue consolation discourages them. Under the logic of trauma and recovery, consolation can be seen to signify an attempt to break the cycle of recurrent, paralyzing violence. In *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*, John Su makes a similar case for the constructive possibilities of nostalgia. Su argues that, by providing an alternative imaginative position from which to critique the present, nostalgia "facilitates an exploration of ethical ideals in the face of disappointing circumstances."[365] Although Hemmings suggests an emotional utility for nostalgia, and Su an intellectual

[363] Hemmings, 52.
[364] Caruth, 2.
[365] Su, John. *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*. (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005), 4.

utility, each depends on nostalgia's imaginative aspect. Nostalgia has the capacity to do positive work because it provides a habitable external perspective from which to contemplate alternatives to contemporary material conditions.

Tolkien himself argues for the virtues of consolatory aesthetics in "On Fairy-Stories." In fact, the essay in its entirety can be read as an extended apology for the consolatory virtues of the fantastic in the modern world particularly.[366] Tolkien's chief target is the contemporary perception that the fantastic is not serious or viable literary mode. Throughout the course of the essay, he cites accusations of escapism that are frequently leveled against the fantastic. Although Adorno's rejection of representational art is more radical and absolute than these critiques, there is an affinity to be found between them. Each opposes the fantastic on the principle that it occludes unpleasant truths in favor of comforting (and, it is implied, disabling) lies. Tolkien contends that these critics have failed to accurately assess the need for such imaginative action, famously accusing them of "confusing … the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter."[367] What critics identify as concealment or naiveté intrinsic to fantastic literature in fact signals an implicit critique:

> it is after all possible for a rational man … to arrive at the condemnation, implicit at least in the silence of 'escapist' literature of progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say 'inexorable' products.[368]

The modern fantastic's turn away from modernity toward what might be called nostalgia does not here signal a suppression of modernity's unpleasant truths, but rather an attempt

[366] Tolkien of course uses the word 'fantasy,' as it was not yet burdened by the genre associations it now carries. I persist in my use of 'fantastic' throughout, but we refer in essence to the same phenomenon.
[367] "On Fairy-Stories," 148.
[368] "On Fairy-Stories," 149.

to navigate, and perhaps mitigate, their most destructive effects on those who experience them. In other words, when it appears in the context of modernity, Tolkien's conception of the fantastic relies on the presence in its readers of precisely the traumatizing modern awareness that it is accused of suppressing. In the absence of this kind of knowledge, the -fantastic is purposeless.

The disillusioning, dispiriting nature of the modern condition makes the fantastic uniquely capable of recuperative work in Tolkien's opinion. In what he describes as "recovery," the fantastic's capacity enable authors to imaginatively dismantle the sensory components of material reality and recombine them produces an effect rather like the Russian formalist concept of defamiliarization:

> We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses – and wolves. This recovery fairy-stories help up make.[369]

"Recovery" makes possible a childlike rediscovery of that which has been rendered mundane in the ennui of modern life. It discourages rather than engenders complacency. Although the process can be interpreted as a nostalgic return to an imaginative unspoiled state, it also bears affinities with Judith Herman's model of storytelling as a means of traumatic recovery. Both compel a deliberate, imaginative reconnection with the past with the goal of transforming the present and lending to it new potential. Tolkien in fact refers to "return and renewal of health" as concomitant effects, describing the resultant state as "a re-gaining, regaining of a clear view."[370] "Recovery" does not redress the loss of innocence; rather, like traumatic recovery, it repairs the lenses with which we interpret

[369] "On Fairy-Stories," 146.
[370] "On Fairy-Stories," 146.

our world in the aftermath of loss. The past is not revisited, but experienced as if it were new, absent the certitude imposed by hindsight. In contrast to the recurrent experience of trauma which limits continuity to repetition, recovery restores the potential for newness.

Tolkien identifies a connection between the critical opinion of the fantastic to the disparagement that was directed at the shell-shocked soldier. In what he describes as the "Escape" function, the fantastic permits an imaginative departure from what we understand to constitute "Real Life."[371] Tolkien's ironic use of the term refers specifically to those for whom "reality" constitutes only the spaces and trappings of a modern, industrialized urban space. This prioritization tends to regard all other spaces and modes of existence as backward. Moreover, it proceeds from and thus implicitly endorses a progressive ideology, along with its destructive consequences:

> 'The March of Science, its tempo quickened by the needs of war, goes inexorably on … making some things obsolete, and foreshadowing new developments in the utilization of electricity': an advertisement. This says the same thing only more menacingly.[372]

Tolkien aligns his model of escape with the rejection of jingoistic rhetoric and mechanized warfare expressed by many veterans of the war. It is not for the escape itself that critical discourse condemns the fantastic mode; as Tolkien notes, the critique is limited to fiction; in the real world, escape is often a necessary, even practical undertaking. Rather it is because, like the stories and traumas of soldiers returning from the front, fantastic escape asserts the possibility of a world that is at odds with ideological priorities. "Escape" in this sense is condemned because reality is invested with an

[371] "On Fairy-Stories," 148.
[372] "On Fairy-Stories," 149.

ideological dimension which, whether in fatalist or laudatory terms, maintains the supremacy of progress as a historical framework.

Perhaps the most stringent critiques of Tolkien's theory of the fantastic have been reserved for the element he calls "consolation." This effect, he tells us, arises from "the joy of the happy ending … the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale.'[373] This principle gives rise to Tolkien's concept of "eucatastrophe" – that is, the opposite of catastrophe, a sudden and unexpected happy outcome. At least since Colin Manlove's *Modern Fantasy*, critics have accused Tolkien's work, most especially *The Lord of the Rings* of demonstrating a doe-eyed naiveté in its conclusion. For his part, Manlove argues that what he sees as the ubiquity of joyous turns in the narrative undermines its coherence: a "sense of inevitability comes over the reader: nothing is at risk, nothing can be lost; Frodo is home and dry under the umbrella of authorial fortune."[374] This accusation parallels Adorno's condemnation of aestheticization in that both are concerned with the capacity of art and literature to conceal unpleasant realities, to the detriment of those who consume them. (It is perhaps similar logic that leads Manlove to declare Sauron the most realistic character in the text, precisely because he remains unrepresented).[375] In broad terms, twentieth-century criticism tended to construe consolatory effects in literature as a betrayal of responsibility, both because it is unrealistic, and because it alleviates the pain of existence, and thus cheats our ongoing need to reckon with the past.

[373] "On Fairy-Stories," 153.
[374] Manlove, 184.
[375] Manlove, 190.

Tolkien's own argument, however, undermines the assumption that the consolation provided by the fantastic represents a definitive end state. If indeed such consolation is aligned with closed mourning, it is an extremely provisional type. He refers to eucatastrophe as a "turn," because, he cautions, "there is no true end to any fairy tale." "Happily ever after," is "no more thought to be the real end … than the frame is of the visionary scene." In contrast, he argues, "most modern 'realistic' stories" are comparably insular, "already hemmed within the narrow confines of their own small time."[376] The eucatastrophe thus represents not an end to suffering and mourning, but a reprieve – temporary by definition. Consolation in this model does not mean the redress of every injury, but a perhaps irrationally-achieved return of a sense of continuity. Rather, the happy ending is a transformative moment that "reflects its glory backwards," recontextualizing that which has come before and creating the possibility of new continuities to repair old wounds. Critical readings that highlight Tolkien's overly sunny endings thus emerge in part from misreading the finality with which his texts are meant to conclude – a misjudgment of the limits of the text, we might say. They are only ever a respite, offering hope but acknowledging the inescapability and ultimate irreconcilability of mass suffering.

If we understand the fantastic and its aestheticizing effect to be serving the demands of mourning by offering freedom from the constraining, recursive state brought on by traumatic loss, then it becomes possible to acknowledge the profound need for such consolation that must have been felt by British society during and after the Great War. It is perhaps easy to forget the extent of the loss suffered during the war: "three million

[376] "On Fairy-Stories, 160-61.

Britons out of forty-two million lost a close relative … The secondary bereaved comprised virtually the entire population."[377] The enormity of these losses compelled a re-emergence of mysticism, and what was in some ways a nationwide state of mourning. If the end of mourning unduly absolves us of the burdens of the past, the perpetual deferment of closure implies a never-ending return to the disruptive event of loss. By preventing the establishment of a coherent history, it limits the capacity to build a future. The ability of the individual, to say nothing of British society, to move forward necessitated some degree of consolation, however it might be achieved. To all this Tolkien brings his imaginative history as an apparatus with which to render meaning through a past that is not defined by its complicity in the present catastrophe.

The Reconstruction of History

At the core of Tolkien's model of history is a rejection of dominant narratives of progress. This model is informed and shaped by the logic of trauma and the imperative of mourning. Positivist ideologies sublimate the atrocities of the past by casting them as the price of progress – the regrettable but necessary sacrifices that cleared the way for the superior present.

Violations of the social contract "too terrible to utter aloud" become unspeakable on an immense scale. Traumatic silence is made collective by creating the violations as beneficial to those who are obligated to speak out. Entire populations are rendered complicit in the atrocities of the past. But the atrocity haunts precisely because it exposes

[377] Johnson, 4.

the precarious foundation on which the present is built, the bad faith with which we ascribe to progress our better angels. Middle-Earth opposes this by manifesting the signs of trauma within its landscape, endowing it with memorial qualities independent of any mourning or silencing consciousness. *The Book of Lost Tales* constructs a history that is defined by the recurrence of loss and the paralyzing effects of a present that is perpetually determined by the violence of the past. The elves' salvation from violence does not take the form of material victory, but rather a memorial plea to escape the machinery of history that has ground and diminished them.

The call for a history free from the silencing and paralyzing effects of progress is famously made by Walter Benjamin in "Theses on the Philosophy of History." He characterizes this call as the "angel of history:"

> A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[378]

Jay Winter argues that this type of backward gaze is apparent in "so many writers, artists, politicians, soldiers, and everyday families in this period [reflecting] the universality of grief and mourning in Europe from 1914."[379] This perspective is likewise present in Tolkien's earliest work, visible through the language and logic of trauma. Moreover,

[378] Benjamin, 257-58.
[379] Winter, 223.

while "Angelus Novus" is a distinctly modern work, Benjamin draws meaning from it in part by drawing on the fantastic; the representational weight of a literal perspective on history is borne by the figure of an angel. The imaginative demands of describing a temporal point of view that is at odds with ideological and experiential precedent can only be fulfilled by constructing and personifying a mythic figure.

In Tolkien's fiction, this backward-looking perspective is embodied by a character who is simultaneously the product of three histories of trauma. Eärendel is descended from elves, humans, and by way of his maternal great-grandmother, the divine Ainur. In every version of the legendarium, he is a sailor who finds his way to Valinor in defiance of the ban placed on travel to the continent of the gods. In the version of the narrative ultimately published in *The Silmarillion*, Eärendel serves as witness to the suffering of the people of Middle-Earth. Authorized by his status as an inheritor of both earthly legacies, he testifies before the Valar on behalf of his own traumatic past, as well as the humans and elves across the ocean who cannot speak for themselves. His speech conjures the violence of the past, and asserts its claim on the present, calling on the Valar to redeem the losses of the elves in the same way Benjamin's angel longs to awaken the dead.

> Eärendel stood before [the Valar] and delivered the errand of the Two Kindreds. Pardon he asked for the Noldor, and pity for their great sorrows, and mercy upon the Men and Elves and succor in their need. And his prayer was granted.[380]

Eärendel is empowered to speak on behalf of the Kindreds because he embodies the long, parallel cultural narratives of trauma that have culminated in his existence. His singular

[380] *The Silmarillion*, 249. This is largely identical to the text that appears in the original "Quenta Silmarillion;" the published text updates names and terminology and was thus used for the purpose of clarity.

being literalizes his role as witness, which for Shoshana Feldman means "to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude." The act of witnessing implies singularity; if Eärendel were one of many capable of speaking, he would not be compelled to speak. Likewise, however, to witness is "to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* other and *to* others."[381] The witness acts as a conduit between the victim and the listener, provided access to hidden histories of trauma, a boundary-crossing reflected by Eärendel's passage into Valinor.

Eärendel's plea constitutes a request to escape the oppressive sovereignty of history. His voyage is catalyzed by the destruction of Gondolin, the last of the Elven strongholds. As discussed in the previous chapter, the city's fall is construed in some ways as an end to history. It is emphasized as the final bastion against Morgoth. With its destruction, the romantic world is overwhelmed and annihilated by modern, industrialized warfare. The diminished state of the elves subsequent existence is likewise depicted as the telos of the Doom of Mandos, a decree delivered by the eponymous god of the dead. The Doom dictates the fate of the Noldorian elves on Middle-Earth:

> the Valar will fence Valinor against you, and shut you out, so that not even the echo of your lamentation shall pass over the mountains … To evil ends shall all things turn that [you] begin well; and by treason of kin unto kin, and the fear of treason, shall this come to pass. The Dispossessed shall [you] be for ever.[382]

Broadly speaking, the Doom structures the subsequent history lived by the Noldor in Middle-Earth – a teleology of ongoing diminishment, violence, and trauma brought about by past transgressions. Eärendel's voyage, however, violates the first decree – that they

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[381] Feldman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3. Italics in original.

[382] *The Silmarillion*, 88. Of note, Gondolin in fact fell 'by treason of kin unto kin' when Maeglin, the king's son, betrayed the city's location.

will be shut out of Valinor. His testimony violates the second – that word of their suffering will never reach it. His plea amounts to a request that the Valar annul the remainder. That they agree to revoke the Doom represents the crowning eucatastrophe of Tolkien's early legendarium. The decision negates not only the primary motivating force that drives and shapes the period referred to as the First Age, but in doing so, to some degree it negates causality as well. Eärendel reaches Valinor by passing through a boundary that was historically impassable; Middle-Earth is saved by the intercession of the Valar, who had divested themselves from its history. To call the outcome unexpected in the context of the strictures Tolkien places on his narrative would be insufficient. Prior to its occurrence it has every appearance of impossibility, and could nearly be said to enter into history from without. At the same time, Eärendel's lineage and act of witness bind it to the narrative. His plea, and the Valar's assent, remake the reader's understanding of the narrative that precedes them. Through Eärendel, the happy ending appears to be a culmination of history rather than a contravention. His messianic act reflectively restores continuity and creates the possibility for the Nolder's redemption. Bearing witness to trauma is thus affirmed as a potent means of intervention into histories of trauma, and breaking the deterministic hold trauma exerts on the future.

However, this transformative sequence of events only emerged in drafts of the *Quenta Silmarillion*, written in or around 1926.[383] In the version featured in *The Book of Lost Tales*, Eärendel is already distinct as the only character to successfully defy the ban of the Valar and find his way to their realm. But in this case, the most remarkable feature is the way the narrative seems contrived to cheat him of any agency in its resolution. He

[383] *The Shaping of Middle-Earth*, 11.

arrives in Valinor only to find it empty, walk its deserted paths, and return to his home, which is finds to also be abandoned.[384] Notes suggest that prior word of Gondolin's fall was carried to Valinor by birds spattered with the blood of its citizens, crossing the ocean by air.[385] Consequently, this version lacks the narrative act of witness; the blood merely signifies the violence committed, rather than the experience of its victims. Other excerpts seem to suggest that the salvation of Middle-Earth was carried out by elves in defiance of the Valar.[386] Far from the messianic role he plays in later versions, Eärendel here appears to signify narrative discontinuity and fruitless achievement. He is defined primarily by the emptiness of his accomplishments; the single persistent image of his journey into Valinor has him wandering through an abandoned city, with diamond dust collecting on his shoes.[387] This version of the narrative tracks more closely with what is traditionally understood as modernist literature. There is a seeming disjuncture between cause and effect, a thwarting of narrative expectations. Eärendel's heritage remains, as does his location at the culmination of the *Tales*, and his heroic voyage, and yet it comes to nothing in the end. "The Tale of Eärendel" suggests that satisfying continuity with the past is unattainable, that survivors of trauma in this world are incapable of redressing their suffering and integrating it meaningfully into their lives.[388]

The changes Tolkien made to this text between 1917 and 1927 push the resolution of his legendarium in the direction of consolation. We can infer that this shift reflected in

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[384] *BoLT2*, 256. This version of the narrative was never completed, but surviving notes make clear that in this conception, Eärendel plays no role in the delivery of Middle-Earth's story to the Valar.
[385] *BoLT2*, 258.
[386] *BoLT2*, 260.
[387] *BoLT2*, 259. The image remains in *The Silmarillion*, 248, with a festival substituted as the reason for the city's empty state.
[388] Some notes extend this effect even further by making Eärendel undertake his journey at the behest of Ulmo, god of the waters, for the explicit purpose of standing witness before the Valar. These versions seem to imply that even the gods are incapable of ordering the world or lending meaning to existence.

part the mass mourning being practiced in England and across Europe during the same period. Giving Eärendel's act of witness a meaningful role in the outcome returns a positive continuity to a history dominated by the burden of collective loss. It represents a move toward a teleology that is motivated not by the effacement of the past that fuels progress, but by open acknowledgment of the past and responsibility to its casualties. Mourning here achieves closure not by abdication of responsibility, but by the willing and difficult fulfillment of our debts to the dead. This achievement is made possible in the literal sense only by the fantastic mode; the mourning population of postwar Britain could not, after all, duplicate Eärendel's journey. Nonetheless, like Marlene Briggs attributes to D. H. Lawrence, in the aftermath of the Great War, Tolkien found mourning to be "a critical … component of a multifaceted vision responsible social rebuilding after massive violence."[389] The gradual shift toward this type of consolatory conclusion in the ten years following the war reflects a growing recognition of the social need for closure through the integration of the past into present modes of life. Such a way of living is, of course, not rational. Rationality insists on the irrevocability of the past and compels us to leave it behind rather than dwell on impossibilities. The fantastic urges us to attend to ghosts.

[389] Briggs, Marlene A. "D. H. Lawrence, Collective Mourning, and Cultural Reconstruction after World War I," in *Modernism and Mourning*, ed. Patricia Rae. (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2007), 199.

Conclusion: The Fantastic Lens on Late Empire

Although this study interprets the Great War as a catalytic event in the emergence and development of modern fantasy, it would be a mistake to conclude that the war represents an incidental moment of affinity between the fantastic and the experiences of modernity. Rather, in the war, we have a particularly visible moment of the continuing presence and development of fantastic writing during the modern period. It is a key juncture to which the commercial fantasy genre we think of today can trace its roots and thereby illuminate its relationship with the twentieth century, not a singular or unique event. The fantastic proceeds alongside traditionally-endorsed literary forms, surfacing and submerging in turn, appearing in places both expected and unexpected, interacting with and influencing its contemporaries, and grappling in its own way with the same dilemmas of modernity as canonically modernist writing. It both predates the war and endures beyond the armistice; we must refute the impression that it recedes into obsolescence once the war is over. Indeed, it is precisely this type of imaginative temporal isolation that this project was designed to combat.

J. R. R. Tolkien's early work shares a common catalyst with literary modernism in the First World War, as well as many of its preoccupations, but when it comes to the Second World War, the two face opposite dilemmas. At times in its history, *The Lord of the Rings* has suffered from its close chronological association with WWII, even being read as a loose allegory for the war itself. Our capacity to read these later works in the context of their time has thus been limited at times by this restrictive, one-to-one paradigm. On the other hand, if the First World War has at times been over-credited was

the inciting incident of high modernism, the Second was long dismissed as a literary footnote. Writers of the 40s and 50s were viewed as lesser practitioners of an exhausted art. They suffered from working in between the modernist vanguard of literary innovation, and the anarchistic refutation of postmodernism. In *Imagination at War*, Adam Piette argues that this sense of literary inferiority was shared by writers of the time.[390] Recent criticism has revised this, however. Consequently, the literary production of World War II has been restored to narratives of twentieth century literature. Previously understood as 'an endpoint of modernism,' the war now seems 'at least continuous with the experiments of the previous twenty years.'[391] This continuity enables us to extend the principles by which we have connected the origins of modern fantasy and contemporaneous Great War writing to this, later period, as well as backward to earlier imperial-era writing. By the same token, it offers the capacity to read *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as Tolkien's other late works, in the context of their time without relying on the limitations of allegory to provide an interpretive lens.

To illustrate the sorts of readings this strategy makes possible, I close with a brief consideration of Elizabeth Bowen's "Mysterious Kôr" and Tolkien's contemporary (and ongoing) work on *The Book of Lost Tales*, which had by now become *The Silmarillion*. These disparate works are connected by their mutual use of the city of Kôr, the abandoned, ancient, semi-mythic city at the center of H Rider Haggard's adventure novel, *She*. The idea of Kôr, not only as a city, but as a fantastic city that is encountered from the outside only in abandonment and inscrutability, persists across all of these texts,

[390] Piette, Adam. *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945*. (London: Papermac, 1995), 2-3.
[391] MacKay, 104.

which were composed over the course of eighty years. However, it is only by attending to the fantastic as an equal, persistent thread in twentieth-century literature that the significance of these connections becomes visible. That these texts share a mutual ancestry in the figure of Kôr could be reasonably dismissed as trivia. But its centrality and persistence suggest the closeness of these long-isolated threads of English literature. Late modernism and the fantastic had and continued to manifest mutual cultural anxieties that preoccupied English authors writing in the late empire. Kôr's fantastic geography lends a substantive alternative to the "shrinking island" that Jed Esty identifies as the dominant metaphor for the "relative diffusion" of "economic, social, and cultural power in metropolitan London" during the late modernist period.[392] In Haggard's text it represents abstracted limits of empire. But, under the oppressive threat of the Second World War, it takes on the immediacy of a looming violent eschaton. Marina MacKay argues that, when modernism wrote about war, "it was always attuned to what *could* happen and not simply what had."[393] By turning to the fantastic, these writers render through Kôr an imaginative precedent for MacKay's unthinkable "could."

In Haggard's novel, Horace Holly and his ward, Leo Vincey, journey into a fantastic version of Africa in search of a lost civilization. Kôr is all that remains. Emptied of its people, sparsely inhabited by local remnants who can only mimic its culture, the city they find is more a mausoleum than a metropole. Kôr's ruins are funereal, even sepulchral. Its nigh-immortal queen, Ayesha ('She' of the title), describes it as "a land of … dead old shadows of the dead."[394] Even the city's art invokes death, as Holly observes

[392] Esty, Jed. *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 2.
[393] MacKay, 141. Emphasis in original.
[394] Haggard, H. Rider. *She*. (New York: Penguin, 2001), 147.

a mural portraying "with studious accuracy, the last rites of the dead as practised among an utterly lost people."[395] But Kôr is not just empty; it is emptied. A "lighted street," Vincey muses, "has always a more solitary appearance than a dark one."[396] Kôr's desertion is similarly intensified because its remnants of civilization no longer serve a purpose or convey a meaning. The images Vincey observes, and therefore Kôr itself, suggest something greater than simple mortality. Each instance doubles the image of death. Dead "shadows of the dead," says Ayesha. The mural, the work of a deceased people, *itself* portrays death. What haunts Kôr is not simply that its inhabitants are dead. Rather, it is because they have been wiped out so utterly, so completely, that no one remains to remember or mourn them. The artifacts and spaces they leave behind are uninterpretable precisely because they invoke an irrevocable absence.

That Kôr is emptied, rather than destroyed, constitutes an existential threat to the citizen of late empire. Its abandonment destabilizes the civilizational surety on which imperial knowledges depend – that of the empire's position at the culmination of history and its implicit cultural immortality. It is impossible to approach Kôr from a place of knowledge because even the cultural context in which its knowledge was conveyed has been extinguished. Kôr is *always* deserted because it is impossible to imagine a plausible picture of the city in its life. It is a city defined by its desertion, a memorial metropolis whose memory is vacant because no one remains who can interpret its signifiers with any certainty. Kôr invokes not death, but oblivion: the utter annihilation not only of a people but of any means by which to remember them, leaving behind only unanswerable questions. Its inscrutable emptiness arrests and consumes characters in both Tolkien and

[395] Haggard, 141.
[396] Haggard, 145.

Bowen's texts. Kôr embodies the threat that the World Wars and the interwar period posed to the British Imperial subject: the possibility of the end of the civilization that saw their nation astride the globe. Examining these texts' shared ancestry in the motif of Kôr highlights the continued affinity shared between modernist literature and its fantasy contemporaries, even into the late modernist period. Consequently, it suggests new contexts in which to continue the recent reevaluation of World War II-era modernism.

The Blitz – the extended bombing campaign of England by the Luftwaffe – provides the common context in which these affinities emerge. Patrick Deer has observed that 'The Blitz Experience' (a term taken from London's Imperial War Museum) roughly correlates to 'The Trench Experience.' Each represents the dominant imaginative construction of England's encounter with modern total war in its respective world war. However, in contrast to the trenches, which were experienced by citizen-soldiers, the Blitz represents 'the most potent and circulated representation of *civilian* experience at war.'[397] Thus, in the same way that the trenches and No Man's Land provided the imaginative stock that shaped many literary responses to the Great War, London during the Blitz did for World War II. Like No Man's Land, the Blitz transformed the space in which it occurred, creating what Deer describes as 'a new, nocturnal landscape.'[398] Under blackout regulations, even a metropolis like London took on alien qualities of desertion under the covers of darkness and silence. And, like No Man's Land, writers attempting to navigate and represent this new landscape frequently did so through recourse to the fantastic. Like the Great War, the Blitz was attended by an increase of mysticism and

[397] Deer, Patrick. *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 1-2. Emphasis mine.
[398] Deer, 106.

paranormal superstitions in English culture. This turn subverted governmental insistence that the home front "be a modernized space, exorcised of the ghosts, spirits, and séances that haunted and comforted the survivors [of World War I]."[399] The degree to which these practices nonetheless persisted suggests that many experienced the Blitz as a haunted environment. This haunting represented both a collective awareness of the accumulated dead and perpetual anticipation of imminent, unforeseeable attack.

Tolkien was no less familiar with the Blitz than he had been with the trenches. Recall from the opening chapter that he served as an air marshal during the war. His contemporary letters are replete with references to late nights spent listening for bombers in the dark (as well as falling asleep on duty).[400] In other cases, he describes Inklings meetings that ran past midnight.[401] One imagines Tolkien wandering home from The Eagle and Child pub through blacked-out Oxford streets, apprehensive of the telltale whine of approaching planes. This period, it should be noted, overlapped much of the composition of *The Lord of the Rings*. In a letter to his son, Christopher, who was stationed in Africa with the RAF, Tolkien refers to his civilian duty before commenting that he has 'brought Frodo nearly to the gates of Mordor.'[402] For evidence that this collective tension inflected his work, we need only examine the chapter in question: "The Passage of the Marshes." Christopher Tolkien places the its composition around April of 1944, during the last months of the blackout.[403] The chapter portrays Frodo, Sam, and Gollum's journey across the extensive titular marshland on their way to Mordor. As they

[399] Deer, 152.
[400] *Letters*, 58, 71, 81.
[401] *Letters*, 71.
[402] *Letters*, 71.
[403] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The War of the Ring*. (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2000,) 104.

travel during the night, Gollum is seized by paranoia concerning the sky overhead. He stands "to his full height, craning his head eastward and southward," as if in expectation. The first sensory sign of approaching threat is auditory – "a long wailing cry, high and thin and cruel … [at] the same moment the stirring of the air became perceptible." Looking up, the hobbits first see "the clouds breaking and shredding," before "a vast shape winged and ominous [crosses] the moon … outrunning the wind in its fell speed."[404] The passage in fact concerns the group's first encounter with the Nazgûl's flying steeds, but it could nearly describe an approaching bomber. It is more important to note, however, that it conveys the ominous, almost supernatural apprehension of the night sky that authors and scholars attribute to the Blitz.

The city of Kôr has an extensive lineage in Tolkien's writing. In early manuscripts, the name is given to the capital city of the elves in Valinor. Tolkien's Kôr shares many of the features of Haggard's lost capital. Although its name is changed to 'Tirion' in later versions, the city retains this affinity for its entire literary lifespan. Like the original, Tolkien's Kôr is described in terms of death and forgetting. It first appears in an eponymous poem, written in 1915. The poem describes "marble temples white … And tawny shadows fingered long … upon their ivory walls." Again, the space is defined by desertion, and the inscrutable emptiness left behind by forgotten inhabitants. In the city, "slow forgotten days for ever reap … counting out rich hours;/ And no voice stirs; and all the marble towers … ever burn and sleep." The poem is subtitled "In a City Lost and Dead."[405] Although, at the time of the its composition, Kôr had not been integrated into Tolkien's extended narrative, the city retains many of its defining features throughout

[404] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*. (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2004,) 783.
[405] *BoLT I*, 148-49.

subsequent iterations. And like the city to which it owes its name, Tolkien's Kôr is encountered by outsiders in a state of haunting desertion. When he lands on the shores of Valinor, Eärendel (discussed in chapter 3), makes his way into Kôr, only to find it emptied. In Tolkien's early notes on the story, Eärendel "returns to find it [Kôr], only to find that the fairies have departed from Eldamar … Dusted with diamond dust [he climbs] the deserted streets of Kôr."[406] Kôr's unsettling emptiness destabilizes even the certainty with which heaven can be regarded as an aspirational, final state.

Like Turin's death, the image of Eärendel's venture in Kôr persists in nearly every iteration of the story. But what is striking here is not what changes, but how much work has been done, despite many more substantive changes, to keep this image consistent. In the earliest versions, the city is deserted because the elves living there have left to save those on the mainland from Melkor. They have already received word of the suffering overseas – from the birds escaping Gondolin, one note suggests.[407] Thus, Eärendel's purpose in journeying to Kôr is moot; despite his triumph, he is unable to plead his people's case. But later versions, in which the weight and consequences of Eärendel's journey change dramatically, his wandering in the deserted city remains. As of *The Quenta*, composed around 1930, Eärendel in fact succeeds in pleading to the Valar for mercy. But in order to retain the image of his wandering through the deserted city, Tolkien places his arrival during a festival that sends the inhabitants to the home of the Valar. Once more, he finds a city of empty streets. He walks "in the deserted ways of Tûn [Kôr] and the dust upon his raiment and his shoes [is] a dust of diamonds, yet no one

[406] *BoLT II*, 265.
[407] *BoLT II*, 260, 267.

[hears] his call."[408] Although the city's name has been changed by now to Tûn (and would change again later), the persistent image of diamond dust covering Eärendel's shoes demonstrates that it represents a consistent, continuous idea, dating back to the 1915 poem. The image remains in the published *Silmarillion*.[409]

In Elibzabeth Bowen's "Mysterious Kôr," the Blitz comes to represent the ultimate vulnerability of imperial civilization in much the same way as Kôr. The short story portrays a Blitz-era London that is haunted by the anticipation of its own destruction, as well as the conspicuous absence of its citizens. In the moonlit night on which the story takes place, the city is uncomfortably visible. The narrator imagines the ease with which it could be marked from the air, implicitly the perspective of approaching planes: "from the sky, presumably, you could see every slate in the roofs, every whited kerb, every contour of the naked winter flowerbeds in the park; and the lake … would be a landmark for miles, yes, miles overhead." The light is thus construed as a threat, and the city as conspicuously vulnerable. Residences and shops appear "equally brittle under the moon, which blazed in windows that looked its way."[410] All but vacated, the streets seem haunted by the few people who appear, only to disappear again, manifesting as temporary disturbances of the intersection's proper, emptied state. A trio of French soldiers pass singing. A pair of air wardens cross the road and separate. The only larger group emerges from the London Underground, as is rising from the underworld, only to "[disappear] quickly, in an abashed way, as though dissolved in the

[408] *TSoME*, 184.
[409] *The Silmarillion*, 248.
[410] Bowen, Elizabeth. "Mysterious Kôr," in *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*. (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1945), 173.

street by some white acid."[411] Even the narrator's presence at the intersection seems in some way ghostly. The narrative perspective observes the disruptive comings and goings in this uninhabited place without being itself recognized by any of the passers-by. This gives the impression of an uncanny presence, perhaps one specially in tune with the tension that suffuses London's population. But the threat under which the city rests is not, we are told, genuine fear of an air raid, but rather something "more immaterial." In these late stages of the Blitz, attacks "no longer came by the full moon."[412] The vacant state of the city is thus not a purely practical condition, but on that is in some way metaphysical. Bowen's London is haunted not by the concrete possibility of attack, but by a collective awareness of the city's ultimate vulnerability, and indeed, ephemerality, in the context of modern total war.

The characters in "Mysterious Kôr" contemplate the informational lacuna left by the titular fictional city as a means of reflecting on London's desertion. Pepita, a young Londoner, travels with Arthur, a soldier on leave, through the deserted city on their way back to her small, shared flat. As they walk, Pepita takes in the city, dubbing it "Mysterious Kôr, and drawing on Arthur Lang's poem about the city itself:"

> - a completely forsaken city, as high as cliffs and as white as bones, with no history –'
>
> 'But something must once have happened: why had it been forsaken?
>
> 'How can anyone tell you when there's nobody there?'[413]

The emptiness of Kôr both reflects contemporary London and anticipates a future in which it is destroyed and forgotten. Not death but disappearance preoccupies Bowen's

[411] Bowen, 174.
[412] Bowen, 173.
[413] Bowen, 175.

characters – the ultimate ephemerality of both themselves, and the civilization in which they have lived their entire lives. As a perpetually deserted urban space, Kôr provides precedent without explanation. London has the potential to become a new Kôr: the blitz makes this imaginable, but offers no insight into its meaning, or its prevention.

The couple's discussion about Kôr reflects their respective attitudes toward the empire and its potential downfall. Arthur, the good and faithful soldier, downplays Kôr's implications by attempting to relegate the city to the realm of the fantastic: "the poem begins with 'Not' – '*Not in the waste beyond the swamps and sand –*' And it goes on, as I remember, to prove Kôr's not really anywhere." The more skeptical Pepita corrects him, noting that he has omitted subsequent lines. "*The world is disenchanted*," she quotes, adding "That was what set me off hating civilization."[414] But even Pepita leaves out the more pointed selection that appears at the end of the quoted line. The passage is drawn from the end of the first stanza. The complete poem includes explicit reference to the predation of European empires. The stanza concludes "The world is disenchanted; over soon/Shall Europe send her spies through all the land."[415] 'Disenchantment' is the crowning imperial achievement, accomplished by the total quantification and categorization of the world's contents by the colonizing processes of empire. Pepita laments the limiting effects imposed by empire: "Every thing and place had been found and marked on some map; so what wasn't marked on any map couldn't be there at all."[416] Kôr undermines both effects: it exists despite its absence from maps, and it is unknowable because its history is inaccessible. It thus provides a unique resistance to the

[414] Bowen, 175-76. Emphasis in original.
[415] Lang, Andrew. "She," in *Grass of Parnassus*. (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1888), 83.
[416] Bowen, 175-76.

totality of empire's civilizing effect. To imaginatively abide in Kôr is to deny the temporal and epistemological totality of empire. Pepita's attraction to the city's emptied state is thus not an affection for the blitz itself, but the prospect of an existence beyond the boundaries of empire.

The fantastic remained a vital imaginative force during a period that saw it largely banished from literary discourse. Much as it offered a position from which to interpret the events of a war a generation earlier, the fantastic provided recourse to authors who saw themselves as the unlucky inheritors of overwhelming predecessors. It survived as an undercurrent, only to resurface. The deluge of fantasy writing in the later part of the century was in fact the public continuation of a cultural practice that had persisted privately. As the events of the century continued to undermine the stability with which Enlightenment-based English culture had constructed itself, the fantastic provided a cultural outlet for the resulting uncertainty. Thus, the progress of modernity rendered the fantastic more, not less, relevant. It cushions the lurches and sways of dizzying change that accompany historical transition. It posits an outside – of localized time, place, and knowledge – that conjures possibilities beyond the limits of the contingent present. The conclusion of "Mysterious Kôr" peeks inside Pepita's dreams, and finds her exploring these possibilities:

> [She] looked this way, that way, down the wide, void, pure streets, between statues, pillars and shadows, through archways and colonnades. With [Arthur] she went up the stairs, down which nothing by the moon came; with him trod the ermine dust of the endless halls, stood on terraces, mounted the extreme tower, looked down on the statued squares, the wide, void, pure streets. He was the password, but not the answer; it was to Kôr's finality that she turned.[417]

[417] Bowen, 189.

In the face of annihilation, it is the possibility of an ‘after’ that draws Pepita. To restore the fantastic to our understanding of the twentieth century is to recognize and understand the enduring, haunting allure of Kôr. Moreover, it is to recognize the often unacknowledged means by which many find the capacity to contemplate the incomprehensible changes of modernities both old and new.

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